gameinformer®
THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

MEGA MAN 11

The Return of the Blue Bomber

UNLEASH THE POWER OF POINTS

ELITE PROS GET 3X POINTS

FOR EVERY DOLLAR SPENT*

PROS GET 2X POINTS FOR EVERY DOLLAR SPENT*

Redeem points for in-store coupons, digital currency, sweepstakes entries and tons more.

Get the most out of your PowerUp Rewards membership with the GameStop app.

Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

VISIT **POWERUPREWARDS.COM** FOR MORE DETAILS

*Excludes purchases of GameStop gift cards.

GameStop POWERUP REWARDS™

DECEMBER

PRO OFFERS

EXCLUSIVELY FOR ELITE PRO AND PRO MEMBERS

50% OFF

Utopia 360 Virtual Reality Headset
$8.99 ~~$17.99~~

UTOPIA 360°
UTOPIA 360° VIRTUAL REALITY

Utopia VR Headset W/BT Controller
$12.50 ~~$24.99~~

Offer valid 12/17/17 – 12/31/17
Up to $12.50 savings Valid for Pro members only. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

$15 OFF

on select Xbox One Wireless Controllers with purchase of any Xbox One Console

Only @ GameStop

$49.99 ~~$64.99~~

$54.99 ~~$69.99~~

Offer valid 12/1/17 – 12/31/17 toward Xbox One Wireless Controllers regularly priced $64.99 or above. Valid for Pro members only. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

$5 OFF

UNLOCK!
UNLOCK!
UNLOCK!

All Escape Room Card Games

Offer valid 12/1/17 – 12/31/17
Valid for Pro members only. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

$20 OFF

RECOIL
THE WORLD IS NOW GAME
MULTI-PLAYER STARTER SET

RECOIL Starter Sets

Offer valid 12/1/17 – 12/31/17
Valid for Pro members only. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

Review This... No This...

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

Reviewing modern-day games can be a circus. I remember a day when we got the cartridge months in advance of the game's release, and the game we played for review was essentially the game that consumers bought months later. There were no day-one patches or microtransactions to judge.

It's easy to long for those "good old days," but the fact of the matter is while those classics from the first three decades will stand the test of time, gaming today is the best it has ever been. RIght now gamers have more ways to play a greater variety of games than at any other time in history.

However, this evolution has come with a price. In the modern era, publishers frequently ship broken games with giant day-one patches and service outages. With early access and betas, gamers literally pay for the honor of playing incomplete games. And regardless of price, most games offer microtransactions or other in-game items for purchase – some benign, and others outright evil.

Within this swirl of chaos, reviews from outlets like *Game Informer* need to address not only the core game, but the services that surround them. To say it is a daunting task, especially when a patch or service change can drastically affect how a game behaves or feels, is a dramatic understatement.

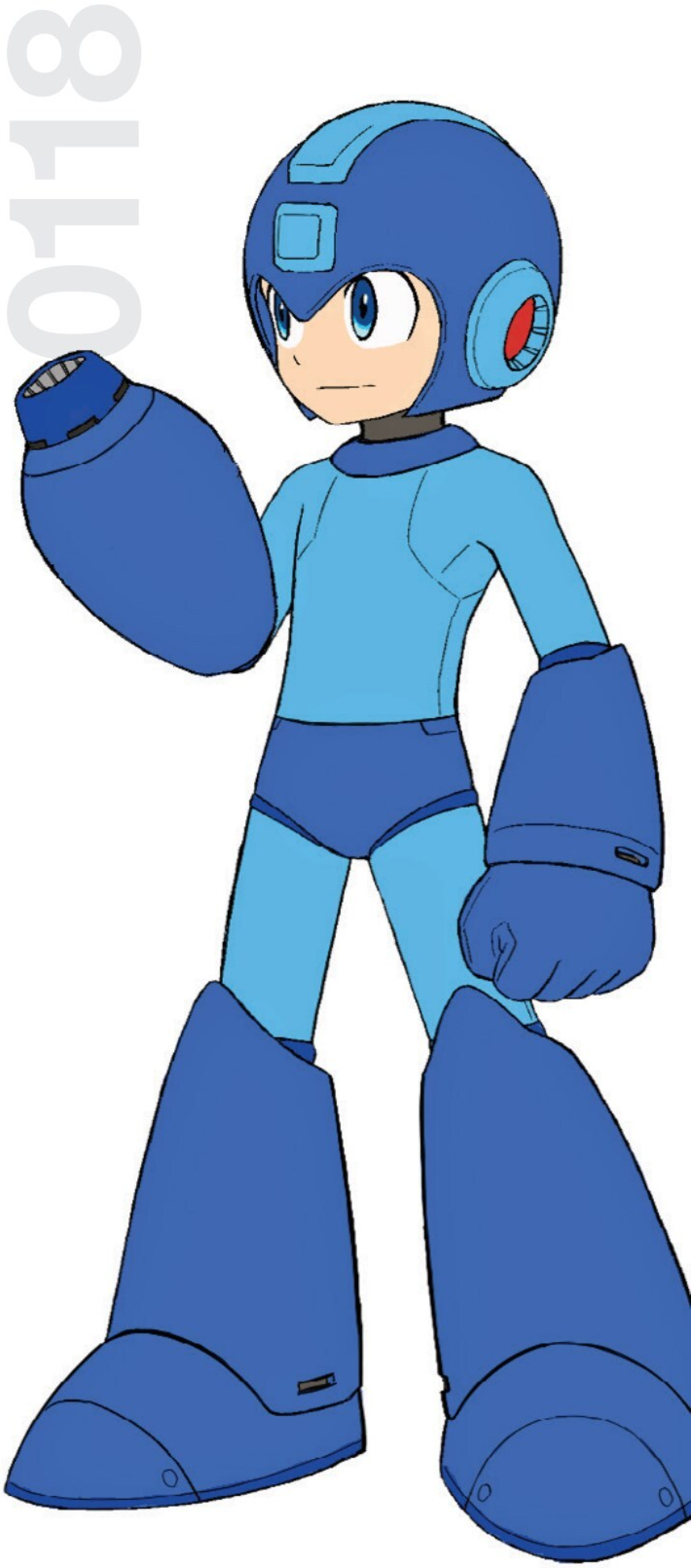
Star Wars Battlefront II is a fantastic example. Our reviewer, Andy Reiner, had to scrap his first review hours before it published due to changes EA made to the in-game economy, and then within a day after we published the new review, Electronic Arts turned off all microtransactions due to public pressure and we had to change the review again (which you can read on page 82). As I write this, we still don't know how microtransactions will eventually interact with the game once they are turned back on, leaving reviewers and consumers with an incomplete understanding of the product.

I'm not looking for sympathy for the game reviewer or for the direction games have gone. Change is always hard, but almost always a good thing. Publishers and developers are going to push the envelope of what we the gamers feel is fair.

Gaming today is truly spectacular, but the industry needs to be better; there is a fine balance between giving your players what they want and taking advantage of your fans. Microtransactions are here to stay, but so are we. As gamers and consumer advocates, we will do everything in our power to keep publishers honest.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



46 Mega Man 11

Capcom's adorable blue mascot is back. We flew out to Japan to play the game, interview the team, and get the inside scoop on why it took Capcom almost eight years to make a new Mega Man game. ***by Ben Reeves***

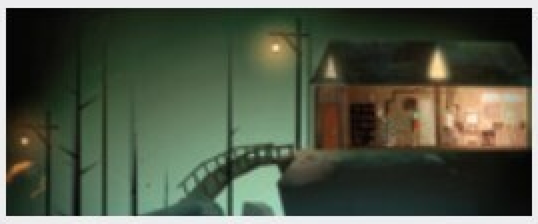
visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

08 **Xbox One X Hardware Review**
Microsoft's new console is indeed the most powerful home console ever released, but the question remains: Does that give it a legitimate edge over the competition?

16 **Final Fantasy XV: One Year Later**
Square Enix's open-world RPG has changed in dramatic ways.

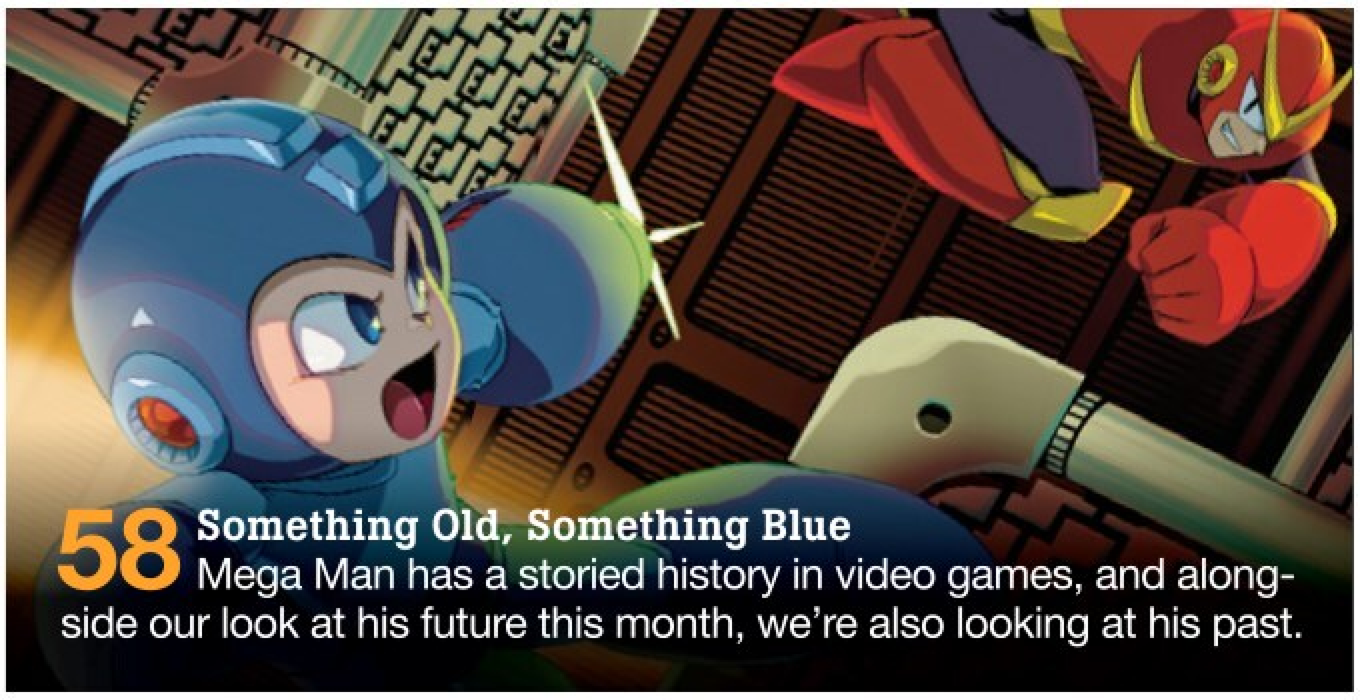
- **04** **Feedback**
- **14** **Afterwords: Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus**
- **15** **The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly**
- **21** **Top Ten Outrageous Microtransactions**
- **39** **Impulse: Indie Sports Games Find A Niche In Pick-Up-And-Play**
- **40** **Gear: Video Game-Inspired Board Games, Winter Gamer Fashion**
- **44** **Opinion: Single-Player Isn't Dying, It's Evolving**
- **45** **Timeline**
- **64** **Previews**
- **80** **Reviews**
- **94** **Classic: Dynasty Warriors**
- **96** **Game Over: Mega Man Boss Or Comic Book Character?**

22 **Risk Takers: How Indie Developers Are Embracing Novel Ways To Tell Stories**
Story is an important aspect of game design, and it's one many creators continue to struggle with. We spoke with a collection of indie developers who are taking new, unexpected approaches to storytelling.



30 **20 Recent Mobile Games Worth Playing**
This past year was a great one for video games, and that extends to mobile platforms as well.

36 **The Grand Experiment**
After four successful years, what are Rockstar's expectations and future plans for Grand Theft Auto Online?



58 **Something Old, Something Blue**
Mega Man has a storied history in video games, and alongside our look at his future this month, we're also looking at his past.

64 **Ghost of Tsushima**
The creators of Infamous and Sly Cooper have been quietly toiling away at a very cool-looking samurai game.

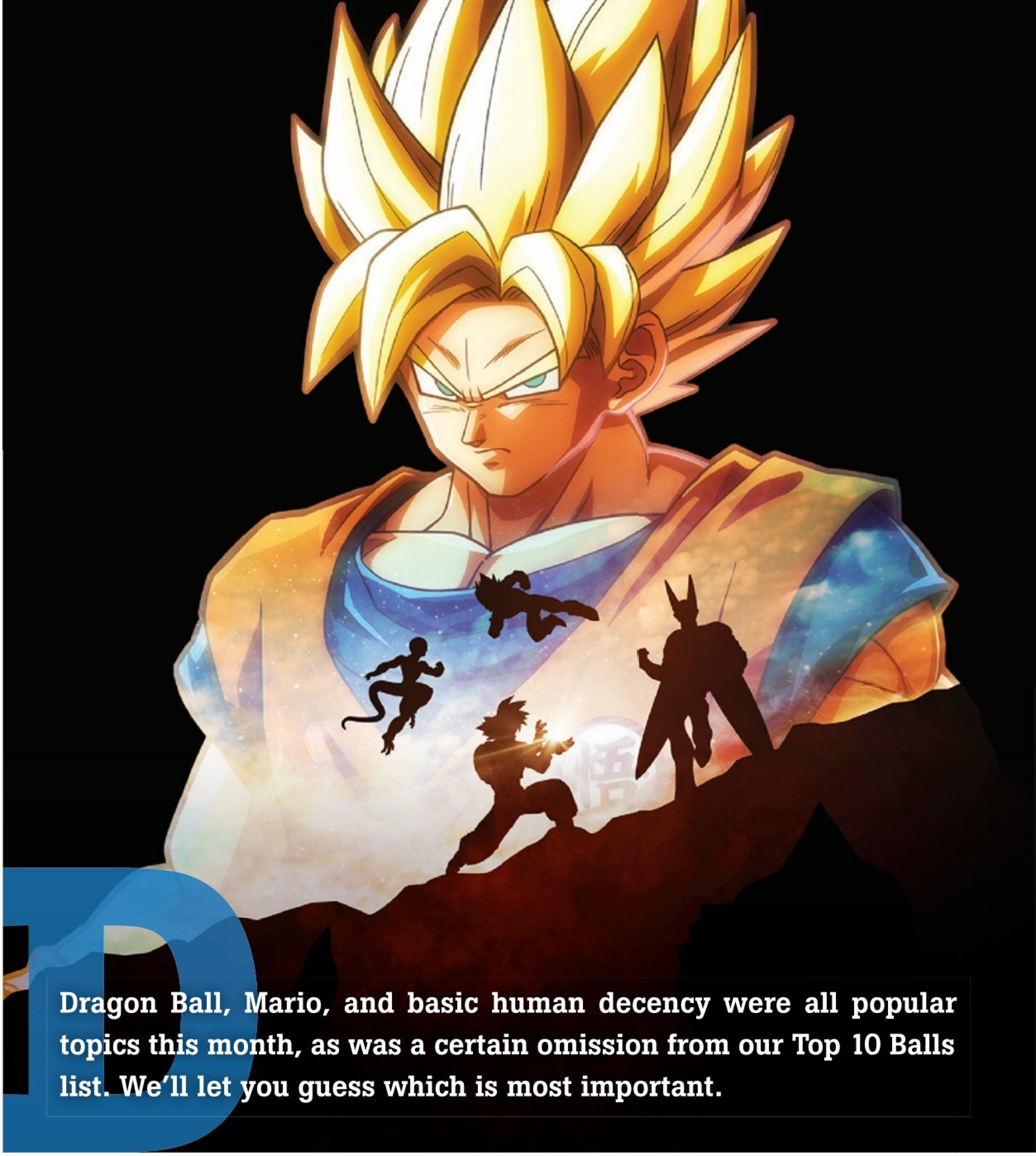
68 **The Last Of Us Part II**
Naughty Dog introduces us to some new characters for The Last of Us sequel.

74 **Spider-Man**
Everything we see from Insomniac's take on Spider-Man gets us more excited.

90 **Hand Of Fate 2**
Defiant came up with an interesting concept for Hand of Fate. How does the sequel expand it?

games index

Ashes of Creation 78
Assassin's Creed Origins 12
Atelier Lydie & Suelle: Alchemists of the Mysterious Painting 77
Battle Chef Brigade 85
Beglitched 30
Bubsy: The Woolies Strike Back 92
Card Thief 30
Cat Quest 31
Concrete Genie 72
Crew 2, The. 70
Doom. 88
Dragon Quest XI 75
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The 89
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim VR, The. . 92
Elder Scrolls: Legends, The 31
Final Fantasy XV 16
For Honor 71
Framed 2. 31
Ghost of Tsushima. 64
Glitchskier 31
Golem 73
Grand Theft Auto Online 36
Hand of Fate 2. 90
Heroes of the Storm 79
Hidden Folks 31
Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds. 87
Iron Marines 31
Kentucky Route Zero 34
Laser League. 39
Last of Us Part II, The 68
Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2 . . . 84
Lonely Mountains: Downhill. . . . 39
Mega Man 11 46
Monument Valley 2 32
Mutant League Football. 92
Need for Speed Payback 86
Old Man's Journey. 32
Oure 92
Overwatch. 66
Oxenfree 32
Pigeon Wings. 32
Pinball FX 3. 92
Planescape: Torment. 32
Pokémon Ultra Sun & Moon. . . . 91
Prison Architect. 32
Session 69
Shadow of the Colossus 76
Sims 4, The. 92
Sonic Forces 92
South Park: Phone Destroyer. . . 33
Spider-Man 74
Star Wars Battlefront II 82
Steven Universe: Save the Light. 92
Sunless Sea. 33
Thimbleweed Park. 33
To the Moon 33
Witness, The 33
Wolfenstien II: The New Colossus. 14
Words with Friends 2. 33
WWE 2K18. 92



Dragon Ball, Mario, and basic human decency were all popular topics this month, as was a certain omission from our Top 10 Balls list. We'll let you guess which is most important.

Threepeat

This month's issue is hands down the best one I've read in a while. I'm the kind of gamer who generally prefers Japanese games over triple-A western titles. From Metroid: Samus Returns winning the Game of the Month award, to the in-depth features on Mario Odyssey, the Super Nintendo's legacy, and the cover story on Dragon Ball FighterZ, this was an issue tailor made for gamers like me. It's issues like this that remind me why I'm subscribed to *Game Informer* in the first place.

Noah Mamet
via email

Fun fact: This issue marks the third straight month that a Japanese franchise has graced the cover of G.I. You can learn a lot more about Dragon Ball FighterZ, Monster Hunter: World, and Mega Man 11 by heading to gameinformer.com.

More Like Ball-oney

I'm sure your team spent a great deal of time thinking about what balls to include in your Top 10 list (Top 10 Balls, issue 295). It's a great list – however, my husband and I were surprised to see that the Morph Ball from Metroid wasn't included. Was this an oversight or was she #11?

Nicole Knoll
via email

I always find your Top Ten articles to be quite interesting. However, I am completely shocked that in Top Ten Balls, the Morph Ball was excluded! I mean the Morph Ball is so iconic; it was introduced in the first game and continues to be a Metroid staple. I am hoping that it was an oversight and maybe you forgot to include it.

Joseph Pendleton
via email

A small group of G.I.'s staff asserts that Samus' Morph Ball ability didn't qualify for the list because she's ultimately still Samus, and not a ball. The rest of the staff is convinced they just forgot about it when making the list, and are now hiding behind a really lame excuse. We'll let you judge who's right and who's an idiot.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Shape Up Or Shut Down

There's currently a heated debate going on about whether it's right for developers to moderate the social behaviors of their online community. Blizzard announced it is trying to curb the toxic behavior of some players in Overwatch, but many are arguing that the attempt to create inclusive "safe spaces" infringes on their personal freedoms and that they should be allowed to behave as they please. I disagree. I ran retail stores for nearly a decade, and if a customer was being abusive to other customers, they would be asked to leave and would not be welcome in the store again. I don't care how much he spent; I would rather have 100 happy customers than 10 abusive ones. There is no reason why an online game (which is run on Blizzard's private servers) should be any different. So, good on Blizzard for taking steps to create a positive playing space and establish Overwatch as a welcoming place to have fun.

Lewis Hiigel
via email

At some point gamers just accepted – and have even come to expect – that playing a game online will expose them to awful people saying horrible things. But Lewis is correct: You wouldn't accept having expletives and racial slurs hurled at you every time you went to the grocery store, and we shouldn't expect less from our gaming communities. The fact that we do is a real problem, and it's up to the companies providing those social spaces to find a workable solution.

Need More Nintendo

I have been subscribed to G.I. for almost a year now and have been loving it! Would you consider putting more Nintendo Switch articles/reviews in future issues? My family got a Switch a few months ago and have been waiting for more games. Do you know of any big ones coming out soon? I am super excited for Super Mario Odyssey, Rocket League, and a few others. In the meantime, Splatoon has been keeping me busy!

Caden Sowada
via email

I have always been a big fan of G.I.'s covers, which are very well designed and have a lot of detail. But I need to know: Why was there never a Super Mario Odyssey cover? Every time Activision releases a bare-bones Call of Duty sequel it gets a cover story, so why hasn't Odyssey gotten one? It seems that the amazing and innovative Nintendo games that usually get a 9 or above don't get cover stories, but the new Assassin's Creed always does. It's also surprising considering that Mario Odyssey was the most hyped game of this year's E3. When it comes to cover stories, I hope you guys give Nintendo games more love.

Ryan Vann
New York

We'd love to cover more Nintendo games, but the decision isn't entirely up to us. In order for a game to grace G.I.'s cover, we need more than just a pretty image – the publisher also has to be willing to share enough information to warrant a 12-page look at the game, plus enough extra content for a month's worth of bonus coverage. As for upcoming games, we took a big look at Xenoblade Chronicles 2 last issue, but beyond that Nintendo's future line-up is mostly a mystery. As soon as there's more to report, you can expect to read about it here!

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Does Nier Automata still have a chance of being ported to Xbox One?"

Technically yes, but not a good chance.

"Where are all the couch multiplayer games at?"

Did you check under the cushions?

"Why did you include the SNES Classic in the holiday gift guide when it's way underproduced?"

Because "Winning Lottery Ticket" seemed less plausible. Slightly.

Most Relatable Feedback Email Of The Month:

"Goldeneye four-player split-screen wasted two years of my life."

Question Of The Month:

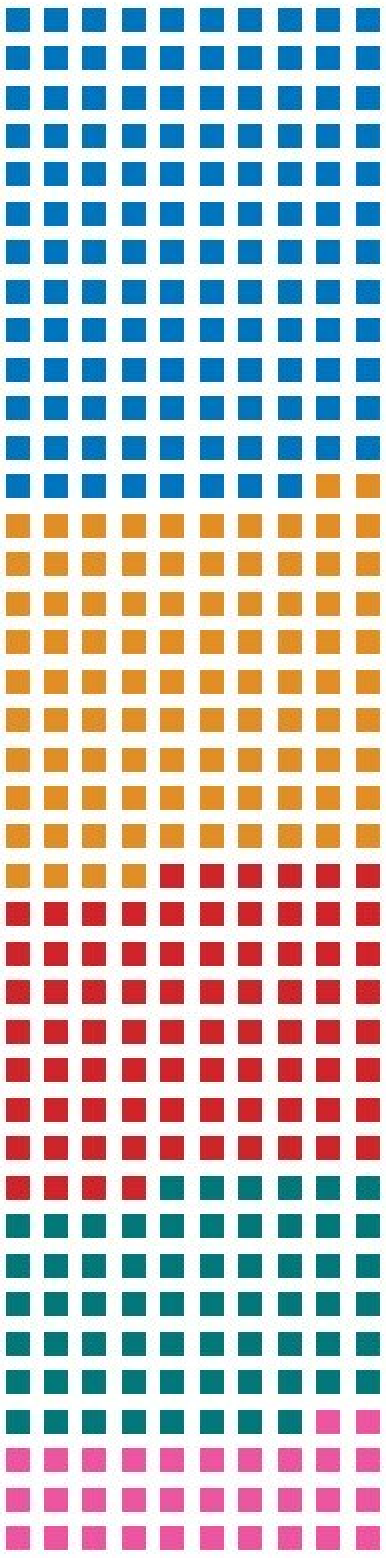
What bad gaming habit do you want to improve upon next year, and how will you do so?

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) This month we flew back to Capcom's headquarters in Osaka, Japan, to learn all about Mega Man 11. Well, Reeves did. We just left Hanson out there. **(Right)** It may not look like it, but these idiots helped raise over $60,000 for sick children during our Extra Life marathon. Thanks to everyone who donated!

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Year-end Line-up/ Purchases
- 🟧 Super Mario Odyssey Excitement
- 🟥 Dragon Ball FanZ (Sorry)
- 🟩 Morph Ball Omission Outrage
- 🟪 EA Microtransaction Complaints

One More Game?

In issue 295, we asked readers what final game they would purchase in 2017, if they could only buy one more. Here are some of their responses.

My final purchase of the year was going to be Dark Souls 3, but I quickly realized that playing in the 15-30 minute chunks of free time I have wasn't going to cut it. So I returned it and picked up I Am Setsuna instead. This game appeals to my love of classic RPGs. It also has the depth that I love and the playability of a game I can drop and pick up whenever I need to. I'm only three nap-times in and I'm loving it already.

Bobby Vaicels

I'm actually limited to buying one game about every three-to-four months anyway, so I now buy games that have as much content as possible, like The Witcher 3, Final Fantasy XV, and Mass Effect Andromeda. My next title will most likely be The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim VR, which should keep me busy for the remainder of 2017.

Michael Casias

I would definitely buy Metroid: Samus Returns. As a fan of 2D Metroid and progression-based side-scrollers, Samus Aran's latest adventure really catches my eye.

Jacob Aycock

I was planning on it being Red Dead Redemption II, but with the delay that's impossible, so now I'm just sad.

Sam Caloras

Just Saiyan.

I loved Dragon Ball Xenoverse 1 and 2, and I hope they will make a Xenoverse 3. If they do, I hope players will be able to go past Super Saiyan 3 so we can do what Goku and Vegeta can. I want to make a Beerus-race character, too. Xenoverse 3 should also include Super Saiyan 4, Super Saiyan Blue, and Super Saiyan God Super Saiyan so we can go toe-to-toe with Gods. So, will there be a Dragon Ball Xenoverse 3, and will it include any of the things I mentioned?

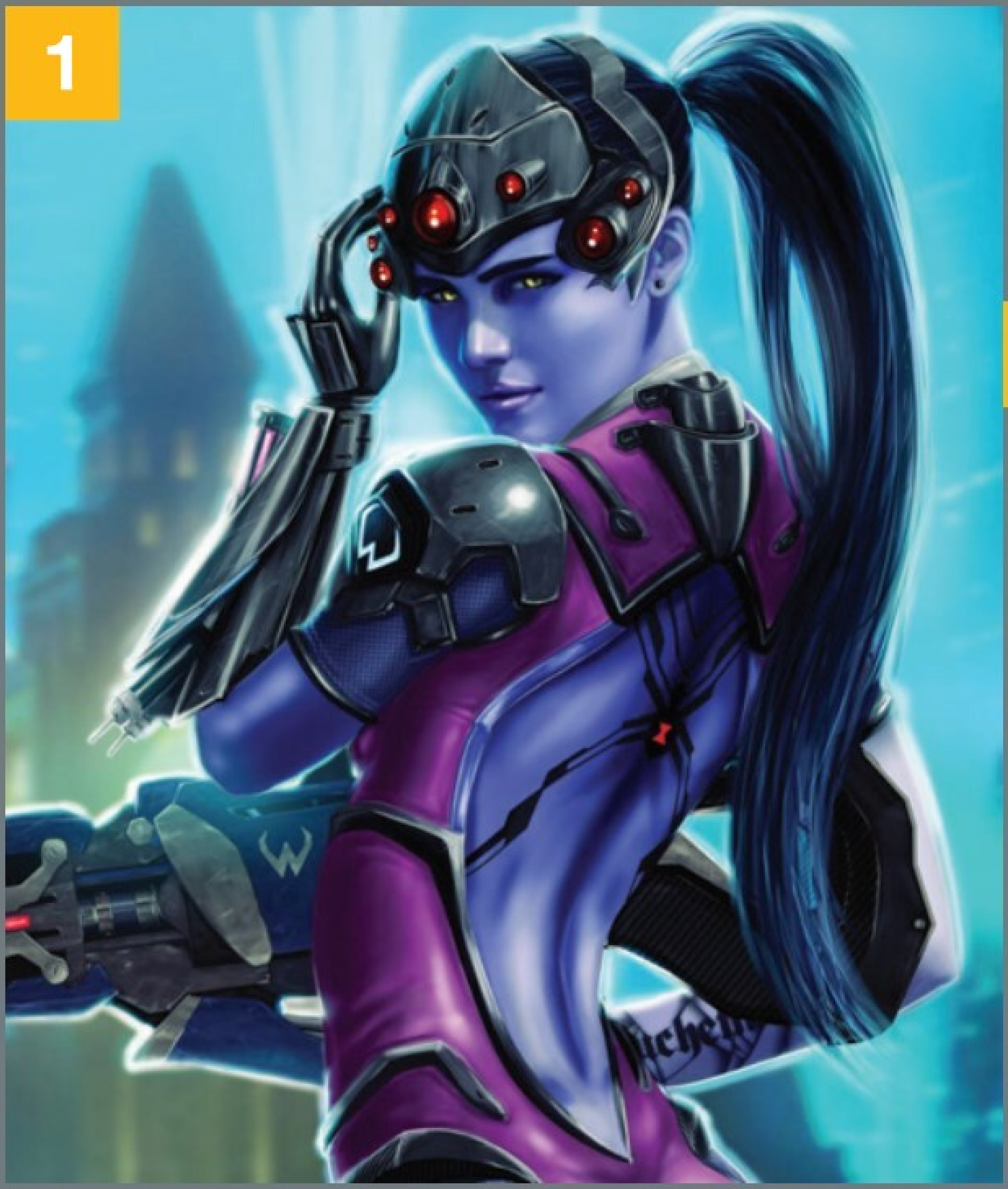
Brandon Ortiz
via email

Given the fact that Xenoverse is the most successful Dragon Ball video game franchise to date, and that Xenoverse 2 is still being supported with DLC, we suspect the odds of a third game are good. In the meantime, however, you may want to check out Dragon Ball FighterZ – not only can you go past Super Saiyan 3 and play as Super Saiyan Blue Goku and Vegeta, we're guessing Beerus will also make an appearance. At least that's what Kyle tells us – we don't understand any of what we just said.

NEW RETRO WAVE
gameinformer
FINAL FANTASY XV

(Left) Recently Dan Tack caught up with Twitch PR director Chase and streaming superstar TheHaleyBaby. **(Right)** Kim recently interviewed FF XV director Hajime Tabata to discuss how the game has changed and what's next. Read all about it on pg. 16!

gallery



WINNER

1 Ben Vazquez

The only thing that would make this Widowmaker portrait cooler? If it was airbrushed on the side of a van!

2 Emily Hiltunen

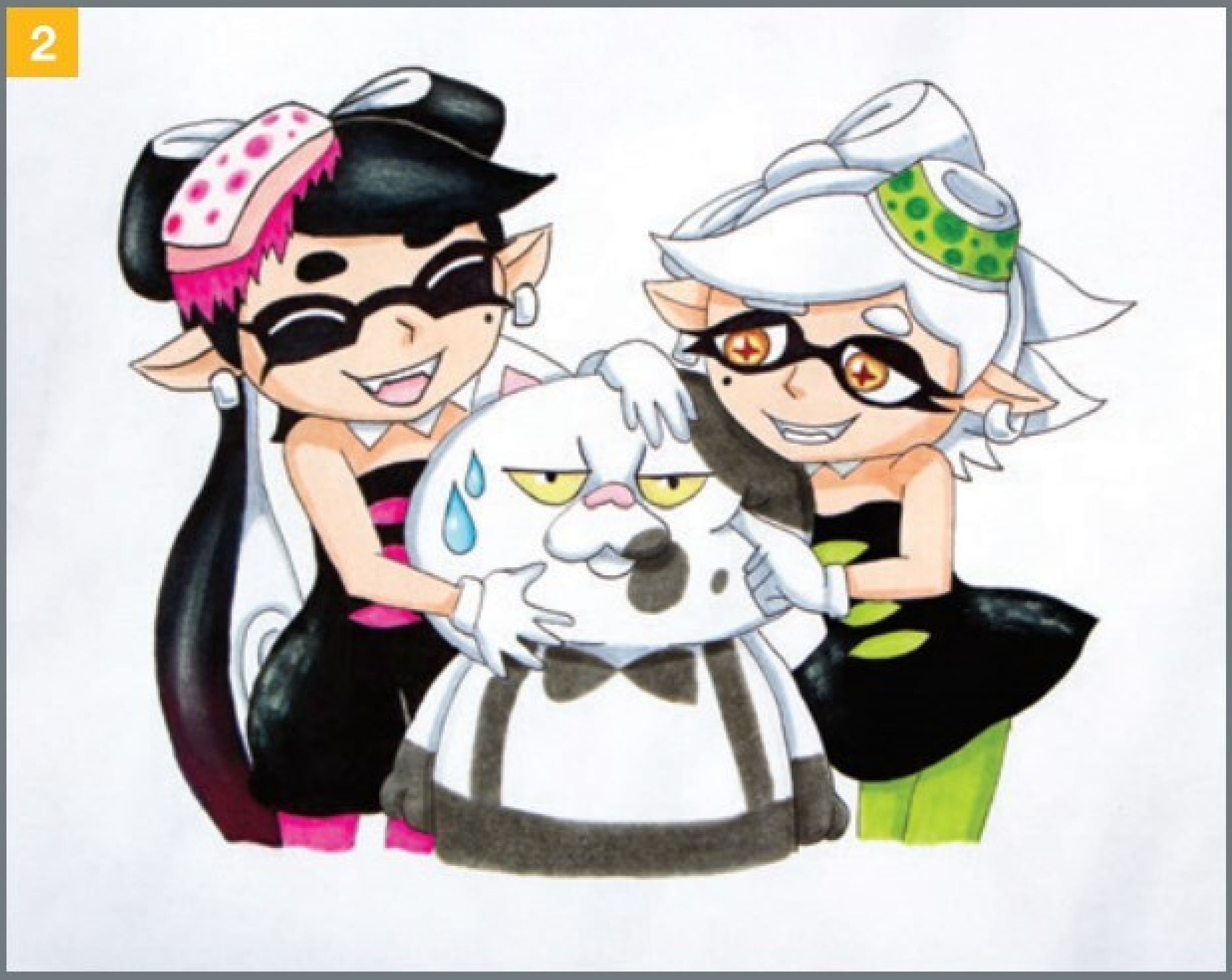
We swear, Splatoon gets weirder every day.

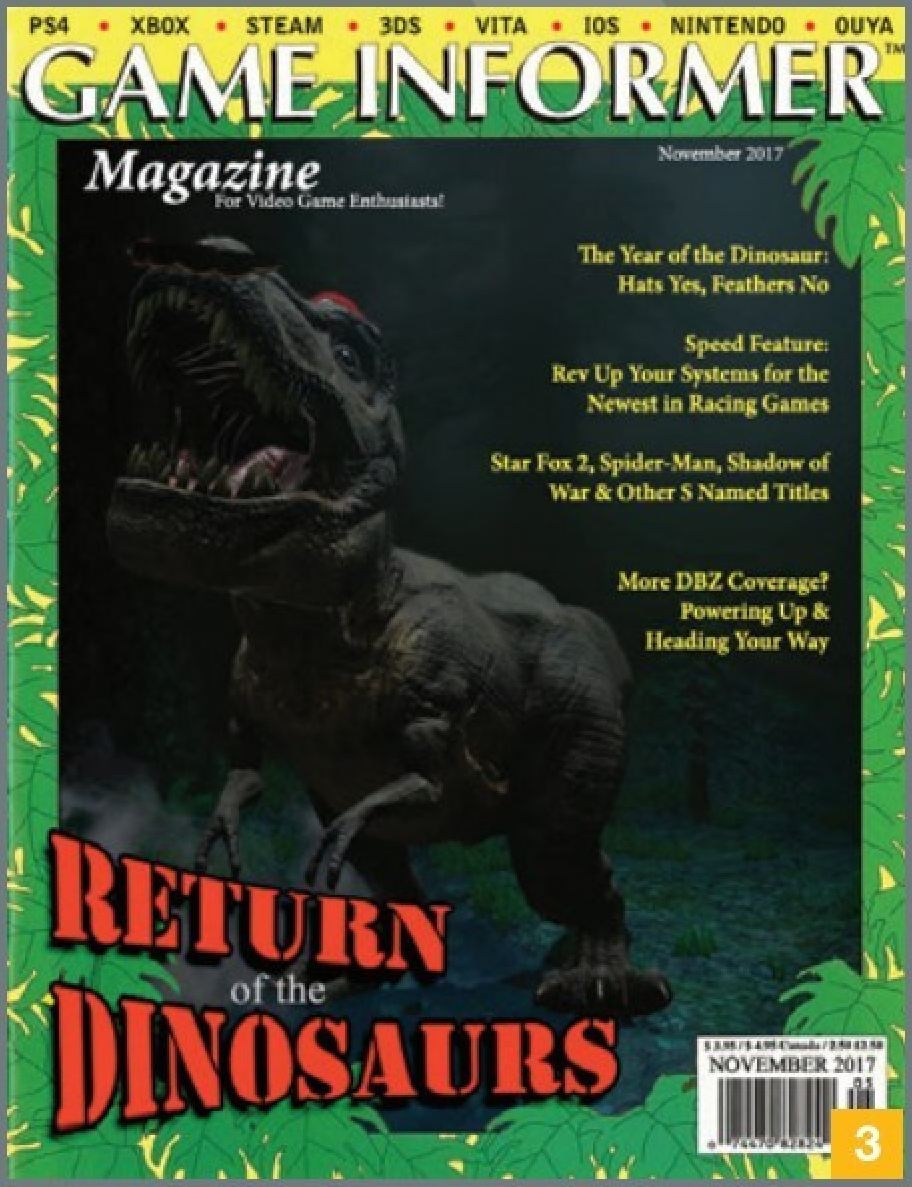
3 Ken Pittman

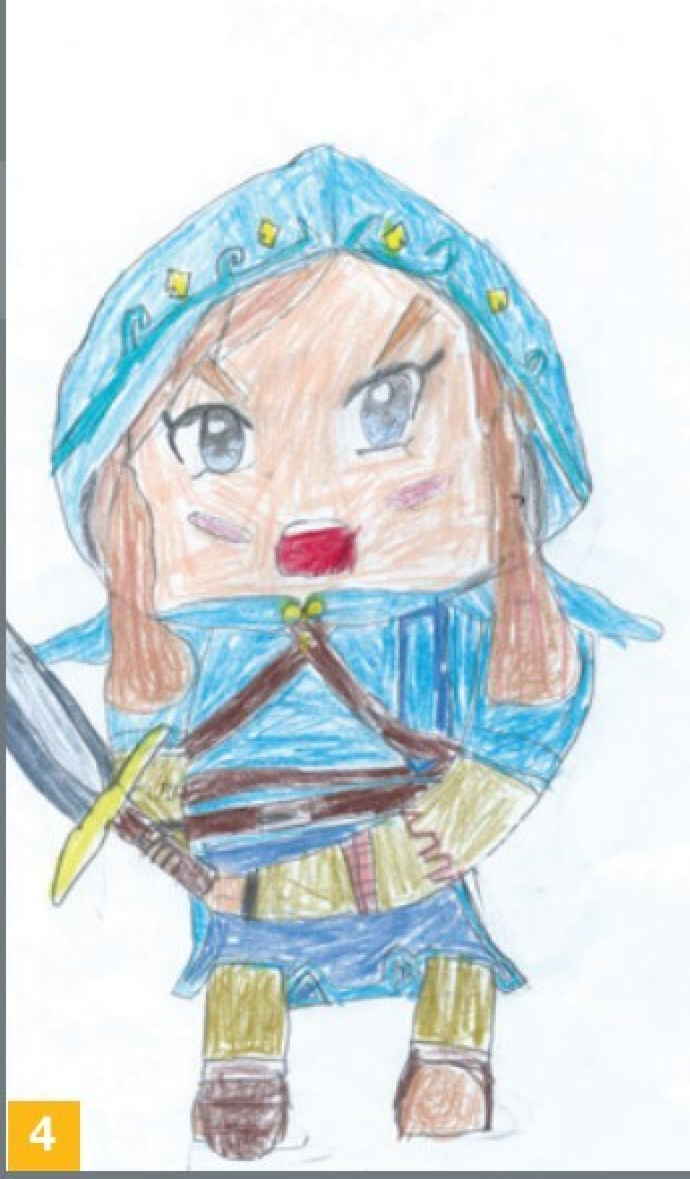
Best. Cover. Ever.

4 Nora Brown

Link has never looked more ferocious and adorable at the same time.




PS4 • XBOX • STEAM • 3DS • VITA • IOS • NINTENDO • OUYA
GAME INFORMER
Magazine
For Video Game Enthusiasts!
November 2017
The Year of the Dinosaur: Hats Yes, Feathers No
Speed Feature: Rev Up Your Systems for the Newest in Racing Games
Star Fox 2, Spider-Man, Shadow of War & Other 5 Named Titles
More DBZ Coverage? Powering Up & Heading Your Way
RETURN of the DINOSAURS
NOVEMBER 2017



» Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest, 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401 | Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

(Left) Suriel visited Bungie this month to play Destiny 2: Curse of Osiris, but he never made it past the Fallen Captain statue. Sad!

(Right) Last month Ben Hanson and Jeff Cork got some primo pointing tips from Ace Attorney localization director Janet Hsu.

XBOX ONE X

Power for what purpose?

HARDWARE REVIEW

NOTABLES

12 living history: assassin's creed origins

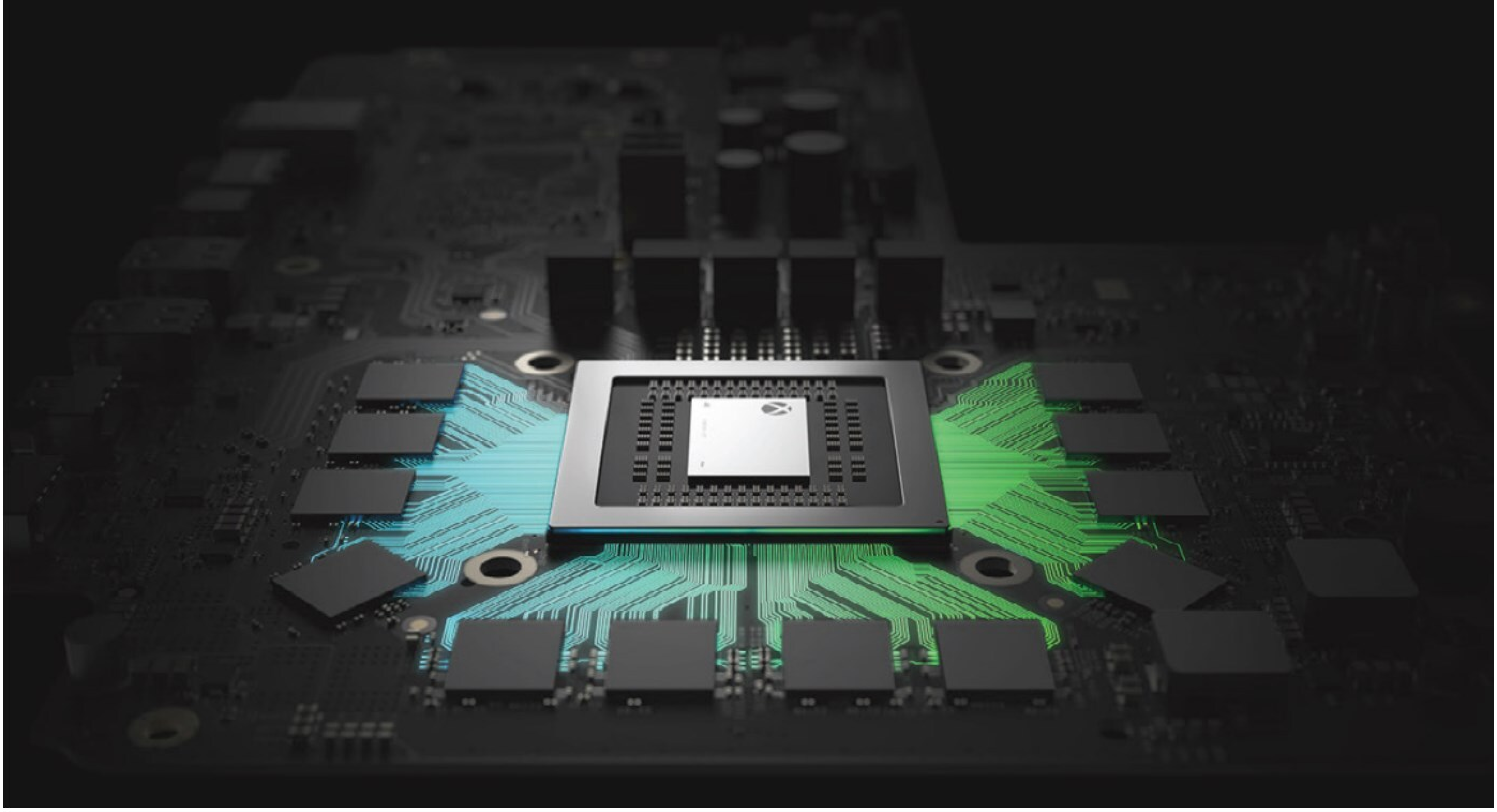
14 afterwords – wolfenstein ii: the new colossus

16 final fantasy xv: one year later

28 the rebellion against the empire

30 20 recent mobile games worth playing

36 the grand experiment: rockstar discusses grand theft auto online



Microsoft branded Xbox One X as "the world's most powerful console," a lofty claim I can now say is true. The Xbox One X is a monster of a machine that delivers native 4K graphics, lifts framerates from 30 to 60, and slashes load times in half. Simply put, it elevates game performance in significant ways, but what titles benefit from this showcase of power?

by Andrew Reiner

That's the big question that sadly delivers an unsatisfactory answer at launch. Xbox One X's impressive technology isn't used to usher in a new generation of gaming, and you won't find any games made exclusively for it. For better or worse, Xbox One X is just another Xbox One – a powerful and expensive version geared for people who want to get the most out of their 4K displays. Yes, last summer's Xbox One S was positioned to bring 4K experiences, but it benefited movie aficionados more than gamers with an Ultra High-Definition Blu-ray drive and 4K streaming.

A year ago, Sony gave us a better glimpse of what a high-end console alternative could be with the souped-up PlayStation 4 Pro. While select first-party games like Horizon Zero Dawn and Infamous Second Son show noticeable graphical enhancements, we're not seeing many tailored games from third-party publishers taking advantage of the hardware. Microsoft's intent with Xbox One X – at least for the foreseeable future – is to elevate the performance of the existing Xbox One library to 4K. The Xbox One X is considerably more powerful than PlayStation 4 Pro, making true 4K results a reality. Although support is strong at launch, with over 130 games being overhauled to take advantage of this powerful hardware, the lineup favors older games over new releases.

In terms of exclusive first-party support, the Xbox One X couldn't have hit at a worse time for Microsoft. Although PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds is slated to launch as a console exclusive on Xbox One in December, Microsoft's first-party lineup for the holidays is razor thin, with Forza Mortorsport 7 and Super Lucky's Tale being the only "notable" new releases tailored to take advantage of Xbox One X.

Forza thankfully is a great showpiece of what Xbox One X can do, running at a native 4K and a consistent 60 frames per second. The high-definition visuals bring Forza's races to life in breathtaking detail, showing a clear upgrade in quality over the Xbox One and Xbox One S versions, which both run at a locked 60 frames per second in 1080p. The difference between 4K and 1080p is most notable in objects and textures in the distance, which look fuzzy and less detailed in 1080p, yet retain clear photorealistic qualities in 4K.

Antialiasing is also used effectively in the 4K version of Forza to reduce the flicker on smaller objects like fences and power lines, but it doesn't remove it completely. Some small details still shimmer or break as they draw near. Objects in the rearview mirror, such as sizeable fences that protect the crowd, don't appear to take advantage of the same antialiasing techniques, and are a little distracting in how much they flicker. The PC version of Forza handles antialiasing slightly better (using 8x multi-sampling opposed to Xbox One X's EQAA), but is otherwise fairly indistinguishable in visual clarity. I know I'm harping on a small detail, but as visuals in games continue to improve the little oddities jump out more.

Although Microsoft doesn't offer many new titles, the Xbox One X lineup is bolstered by an array of enhanced versions of older first-party games, such as Killer Instinct, Gears of War 4, Quantum Break, Halo 5: Guardians, Halo Wars 2, and ReCore. Gears of War 4 is enhanced the most, offering native 4K visuals at 30 frames per second for all avenues of play, including wide color gamut HDR and Dolby Atmos support. Alternatively, the campaign and horde mode can be played at 60 frames per second in 1080p. Prior to entering the game, the player simply needs to dive into the options to select whether they want the performance or visual boost.

Streaming Services

If you don't intend to watch movies and television shows using the UHD player, Netflix offers a nice selection of content supporting both 4K and HDR. Amazon's app also supports 4K, but HDR is not available for any of its programs. YouTube currently doesn't support any 4K content. Any of these providers could provide updates to up their high-definition content.

Assassin's Creed Origins

Gears of War 4 looks great in any resolution, but is truly something to behold in 4K. The vibrancy of this war-torn world really pops. I hope more games down the road offer options as to how the player wants to use the power of Xbox One X.

Xbox One X's saving grace at launch is the third-party lineup, which consists of enhanced versions of new releases like Assassin's Creed Origins, Call of Duty: WWII, Middle-earth: Shadow of War, Madden NFL 18, FIFA 18, Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus, The Evil Within 2, and Dishonored: Death of the Outsider.

Some of these games only offer a baseline enhancement of HDR support (which may also work on the Xbox One S), but a good number of the third-party games showcase 4K visuals (either via upscaling, checkerboard rendering, or native) and/or some kind of performance bump. Assassin's Creed Origins is a great example of showing how much a cross-platform game can take advantage Xbox One X for performance, starting with a nice reduction in load times. On PlayStation 4 Pro and Xbox One S, the load time for a new game takes roughly 33 to 35 seconds, whereas it's just 23 seconds on Xbox One X. Fast traveling from the same location to the homestead takes 20 seconds on Xbox One X and roughly 28 seconds on PS4 Pro and Xbox One S. Origins also looks far nicer on Xbox One X than the other consoles, reducing the pop-in of objects and offering more detail in the texture work.

Ark: Survival Evolved promises to use the increased performance in a number of interesting ways, including a local split-screen update that severs the tether that forced players to stay within a confined proximity. These players can explore the islands independently. Ark also boasts a new "Detail Mode" that runs at 30 frames per second in 1440p, with higher texture quality, longer draw distances, and a variety of environment enhancements, including volumetric clouds and sunlight scattering. Ark is also playable at 60 frames per second in 1080p.

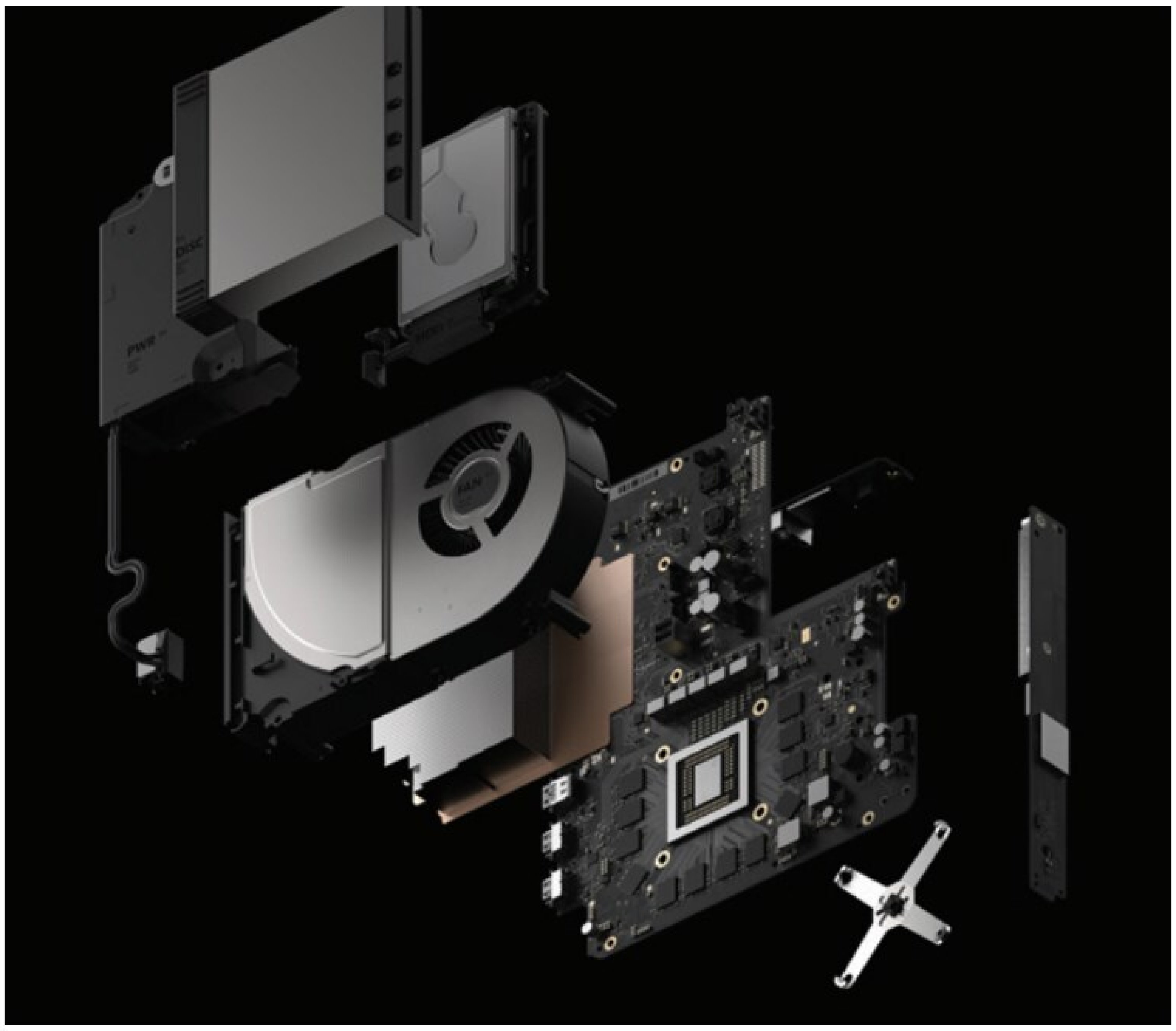
Other notable games like The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, The Elder Scrolls Online, and Titanfall 2 offer a variety of upgrades. Titanfall 2 offers dynamic super scaling and always outputs at 4K, yet alters the resolution based on the GPU load to smooth out the framerate. The Witcher will receive all-around performance boosts, including better shadows, ambient occlusion, and texture filtering, all in 4K. Load times are roughly a minute less on Xbox One X – a significant drop (even without the Xbox One X patch). Fallout 3 runs in 4K with increased sight lines and a smoother playing experience. Some games, like Hitman, allow you to run the game with an unlocked framerate, and yes, it runs far better than before.

Even without Xbox One X patches, most games benefit from the machine's raw horsepower, reducing load times and upping visual clarity of textures.

By The Numbers

The Xbox One X is easily the most powerful console on the market. Here's a breakdown of what is inside the machine.

- **CPU:** Custom CPU @ 2.30 GHz, 8 cores
- **GPU:** Custom GPU @ 1.172 GHz, 40 CUs, Polaris features, 6.0 TFLOPS
- **Memory:** 12 GB GDDR5 @ 326 GB/s
- **Flash Memory:** 8 GB
- **Internal Storage:** 1 TB HDD
- **Optical Disc:** 4K UHD Blu-ray
- **PSU:** 245W, interal
- **HDMI:** 2160p @ 60Hz, AMD FreeSync, HDMI Variable Refresh Rate
- **HDR10 Support:** Yes
- **HDMI Audio:** Dolby Digital 5.1, DTS 5.1, PCM 2.0, 5.1 & 7.1, Dolby TrueHD w/Atmos 11
- **Connectivy:** 3 USB 3.0, 2 HDMI (1 HDMI 2.0b out, 1 HDMI 1.4b in), S/PDIF, IR receiver/IR Blaster port, IR Blaster
- **Dimensions:** 11.81 x 9.44 x 2.36 in
- **Weight:** 8.40 lbs



XBOX ONE X
1TB

Inside The Box
- Xbox One X console
- Wireless controller
- HDMI cable (4K capable)
- Power cable
- 1-month Xbox Game Pass trial
- 14-day Xbox Live Gold trial

Halo 5 is great example of a game that looks much better on Xbox One X in its standard form, and is even more of a stunner when the enhanced patch is installed.

Don't expect too much in terms of performance alterations from multiplayer games, however, as most developers (and Microsoft) want 100 percent parity between all three Xbox consoles. A player gaining an edge in a game just because they have a newer console wouldn't be fair.

At launch, all Xbox One X-enhanced games offer free updates, but keep an eye on internet data limits when downloading the 4K content, as most of it is sizeable. Gears of War 4's download is 103.3GB, Forza Motorsport 7 clocks in at 95.6GB, Quantum Break (with the episode pack) is 178.1GB, and Halo 5: Guardians is 98.5GB. The Xbox One X can be set to automatically download the patches that developers add to the marketplace. Games can also be sorted under a new "Xbox One X enhanced" tab – a nice way of seeing which games received an update.

Given just how big these games are now, Xbox One X shipping with just a 1TB hard drive is puzzling. The Xbox One S shipped with a 2TB drive in some models. Microsoft is clearly banking on the idea of players using external hard drives to store their games, and even recommended we use one for this review.

The Xbox One X hardware design echoes the launch lineup, looking almost identical to the Xbox One S. One nice change is the removal of the dust-catching vent from the top of the machine. The vents are now on the sides and in the back. Most of the heat during my review was released from the back vent, and regardless of what I play, the system is whisper quiet (but is louder when the disc drive is used). The only other distinction is the front-facing USB port moved from the left side of the console to the right. The Ultra High-Definition Blu-ray player also appears to be the same one that came with the S, but don't take that as a complaint – it's a hell of a player, capable of bringing out the best of this physical medium.

Video game console launches rarely give us a clear picture of what the machines are capable of in the long run. Unless Microsoft changes its stance on Xbox One X being just another Xbox One, this launch tells the full story: The same gaming experiences that may look and/or play better, especially if you have a 4K display.

For people who have upgraded to 4K, Xbox One X is the only console that delivers triple-A games in native 4K without sacrificing much in terms of performance. Is it worth the lofty $500 price point? If you want to see what your 4K display is truly capable of, or simply like the idea of games running and looking better (even on TVs that don't support 4K), the answer is "yes." If developers continue supporting in similar ways to what we are seeing in the launch lineup, games are better on Xbox One X.

If you don't care about resolution, framerates, or subtle gameplay enhancements, stick with the hardware you have now. Unless Microsoft changes its stance on all games working on all three versions of Xbox One, you won't be missing out on any adventures if you stick with or purchase the lower-end model. While Xbox One X attains the rank of the most powerful console on the market, it still cannot touch high-end PC gaming, which can be pricey, but will continue to scale to maximize what can be seen in 4K.

Xbox One X is a sound investment at launch, and but Microsoft needs to do a better job of supporting it with first-party games. Rolling out the classics isn't an enticing way of selling new hardware.

VERY GOOD 🟩🟩🟩🟩🟩🟩🟩🟩⬜⬜

$499.99
xbox.com

LIVING HISTORY

Ubisoft Montreal is repurposing the rich world it built with Assassin's Creed Origins to teach players about Egyptian history

by Jeff Cork

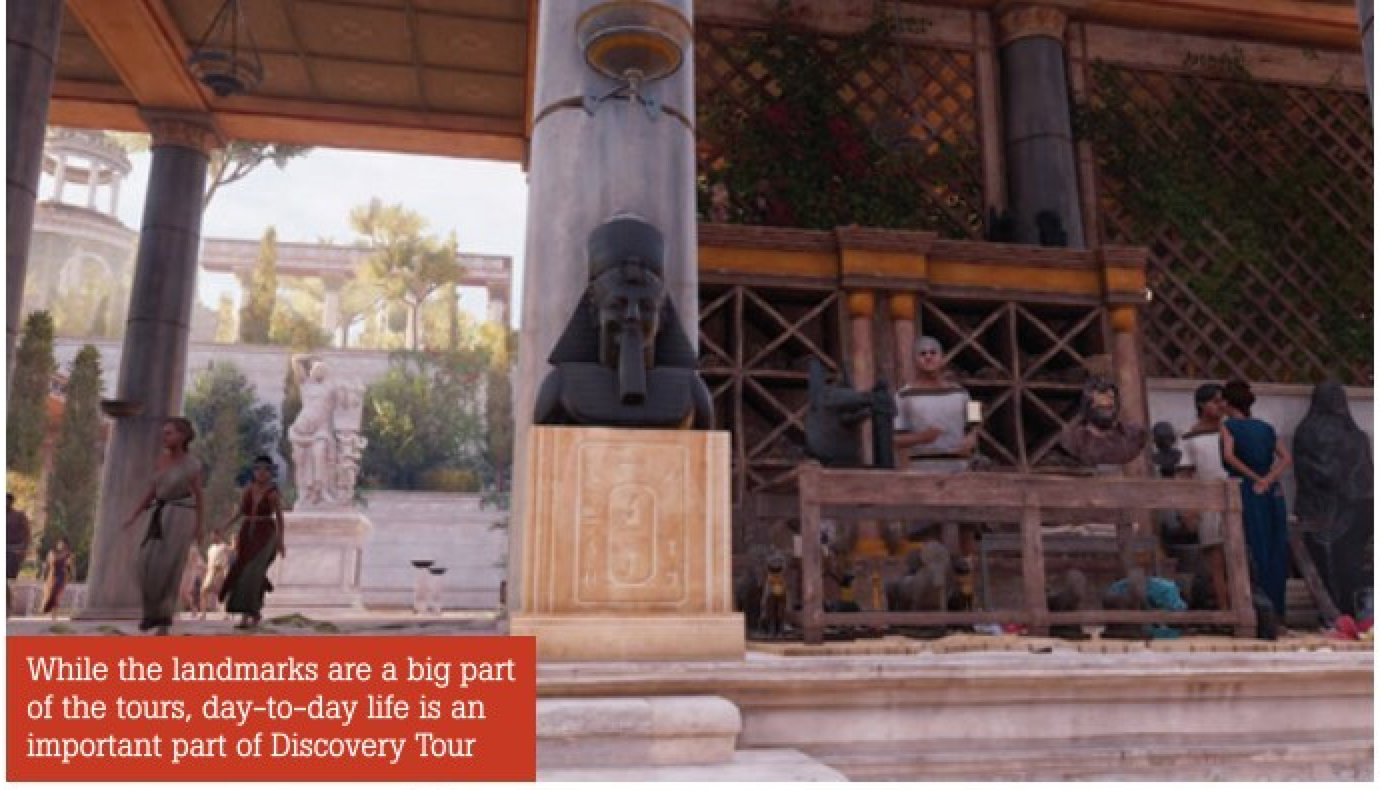
Assassin's Creed Origins features one of the most impressive historical settings we've ever seen in a game. Its rendition of Ptolemaic Egypt is expansive and filled with incredible places to explore. Of course, it's also filled with dangers. Linger too long near the banks of the Nile and you're likely to end up in a hippo's belly. Temple guards may not eat you, but they can take a similarly aggressive approach to loiterers. Fortunately for all of you would-be explorers out there, an upcoming new mode will let you fully explore the world that Ubisoft Montreal built – and learn a lot about ancient Egypt – at your own leisure without having to worry about getting chomped on.

The Discovery Tour is a free addition to Origins that adds a new game option from the start menu. Players who select it can take part in a variety of historical tours, based on a variety of different aspects of life during the game's historical setting. You can learn about the construction of the Great Pyramids, get the low-down on the Library of Alexandria, and get a better sense of what day-to-day life was like for an average citizen in the region via fully narrated presentations. We talked to Jean Guesdon, Assassin's Creed Origins' creative director, and historian Evelyne Ferron to learn more about this exciting new mode.

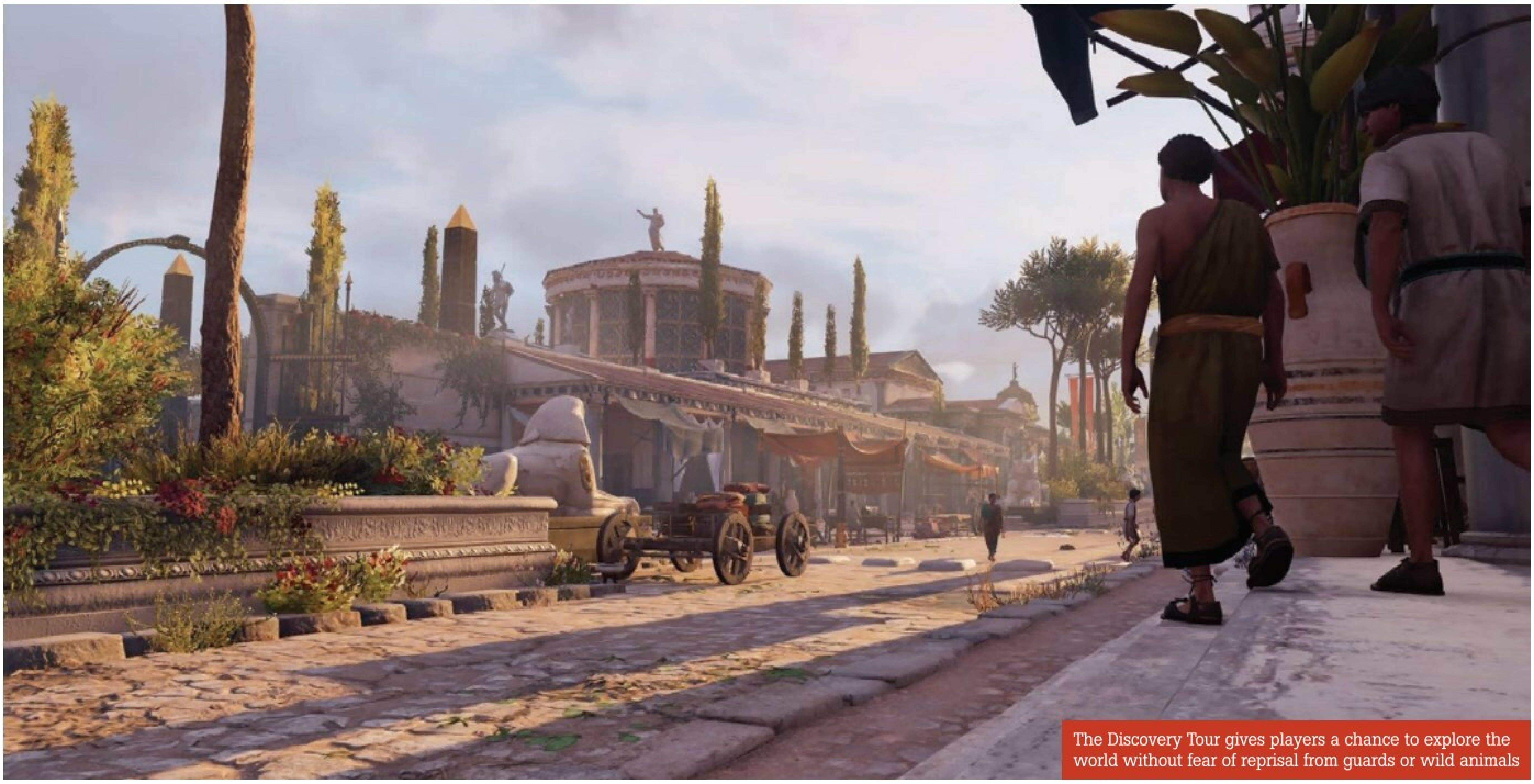
"The idea is to allow more people to benefit from this incredible work of recreation," Guesdon says. In the past, players have been able to learn more about the history behind the games via in-game databases, which featured textual descriptions of the locations, events, and personalities that were featured. Discovery Mode is an attempt to make it easier and more engaging to learn about ancient Egypt, and it was an idea that the team had early on in Origins' development. "We knew since the beginning almost that this was our new version of the Animus database."

The Discovery Tour is completely gated off from the campaign. Players start by selecting a character. "You won't only be limited to Bayek or Aya," Guesdon says. "We will have more than 20 models so that you can pick a man, woman – a child, even – to roam the world." There isn't any combat or fighting, and the animals will ignore you. They'll still interact with each other, however, so players can watch a crocodile and hippo get into a tussle without having to worry about getting drawn into the action themselves. The entire game world is available to explore, and your character can access Bayek's eagle, Senu, to get a bird's-eye view of the world, and call a mount to travel across the world faster.

You can explore at your own leisure, and landmarks or locations that have tours associated with them will be highlighted by special icons. You can either travel manually to those locations, or fast-travel to them if you'd rather dive right in. If you choose to start a tour, an illuminated path provides guidance from station to station. These tours are narrated, and most feature photos and images from museums and other institutions to provide additional context on the



While the landmarks are a big part of the tours, day-to-day life is an important part of Discovery Tour



The Discovery Tour gives players a chance to explore the world without fear of reprisal from guards or wild animals

subject at hand.

"It's totally dedicated to history, so we are not mentioning any AC lore in that mode," Guesdon says. "We know that with previous games some teachers were recording at home very carefully to make some videos in their classrooms to show to their students. We hope that some of them will be encouraged to bring their PC or their console and let [students] experience the tour. We really believe that interactivity makes this learning more attractive and more powerful."

"It feels like a 3D museum, like you walk inside the Library of Alexandria or you walk inside a tomb and you walk inside the city and you have all that information that you can have access to and understand," Ferron says. "When you walk in a museum, you look at the artifacts and if you're interested you come closer to the window and you read the information. This time it's a bit of the same thing. You walk inside that magnificent recreation of what the Library of Alexandria could have looked like, and you learn about the scientists and what people were doing there."

One of the most interesting aspects about the Discovery Tour from a player's perspective is that it makes a point of highlighting some of the times that gameplay or technical constraints forced the team to deviate from actual history in the game. "That's good for the people who play, because students sometimes think that because it's in a movie or in a game it's reality, and it helps them to have a critical mind, to realize that sometimes we have to play with historical reality," Ferron says.

The update is coming sometime in early 2018, though a specific date has yet to be announced. Guesdon says that because it is a completely separate executable from the main game, it's possible Ubisoft could provide the Discovery Tour to classrooms at a discounted price, but those decisions haven't yet been finalized. Regardless, if you already own Assassin's Creed Origins, you'll be able to download the Discovery Tour at no additional cost once it's made available. Perhaps you'll gain an even greater appreciation for not only the work that the Origins team put in, but for the incredible achievements that people made thousands of years ago.

HOTEL
ROSWELL
LADY HELENE'S
LADY HELENE'S EPIC MASTERPIECE
AMERICA
THE NEW ORDER
RESTAURANT

WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

Wolfenstein II launched to strong critical praise thanks to its fine balance of zany humor, challenging shooting mechanics, and somber storytelling. We spoke with Jens Matthies, Wolfenstein's creative director, about how the team built upon the foundation of The New Order and how the sequel's most shocking moments came together. **Warning: Spoilers ahead!** *by Javy Gwaltney*

The New Order and The New Colossus are known for their attempts to deftly combine absurd humor and over-the-top action with somber themes like the holocaust and abuse. What goes into trying to strike that balance?
I've always gravitated towards that juxtaposition. I think that comes from having profound experiences with movies like the original *RoboCop* when I was a kid.

RoboCop has a lowbrow concept: we're gonna take this cop and we're going to turn him into a robot and then he's gonna clean up the streets! It's executed in a way where you can relate to the guy, it's super gritty, and it's also kind of satire on things like the Vietnam War and capitalism all wrapped into one, right? That kind of juxtaposition has always appealed to me.

[Narrative designer Tommy Bjork] also said something that resonated with me, which is also kind of how life is, that you're bouncing between these moments of despair and happiness and constantly everyone is entertaining each other and making jokes. No matter how grim the situation is, you can always find some kind of joke in there and make each other laugh.

That's not to say this kind of tone is appropriate for every project, but I think it's incredibly appropriate for Wolfenstein because when we started it we looked at Wolfenstein 3D and saw that it was kind of the model. For us, that's the gospel, right? So that's what we're going to build on, and looking at it you have all kinds of things. You have this crazy over-the-top violence, the main guy is this muscle hulk from the '80s, and you have Mecha Hitler and all sorts of supernatural things. That sort of unrestricted creativity we tried to capture and imbue our games with.

The middle act where B.J. loses his head and it gets reattached to a new body, is frankly insane and ambitious. How did that come together?
Me and Tommy usually plan all the scenes out together, and so we'll have a big whiteboard with the all of the sequences in the game mapped out. Early on in a project there's some rejigging of that, and once we know that, we divide the work. It's an incredibly collaborative process.

We planned that sequence very early on and knew that the steps we would have to go through. Some of those ideas I had even when we were making The New Order. I kept notes for things that didn't fit there but would fit in The New Colossus. It's one of those sequences as a writer, those are the kind of things you dream about because it's very hard to make it work and so it was a good challenge in that sense.

Strong female characters are at the forefront of both The New Order and The New Colossus. Was this something MachineGames consciously decided to do?
We don't approach it that way. Instead we always try to use that side of ourselves that is closest to that character. So there's a lot of opportunity to say, "Okay here's a character. What part of my personality or experience coincides with this character?" And then you can use that as your baseline and start to explore who that character is.

We don't write our characters "male" or "female" or even think about that. We write the characters expressing themselves in the way they would express themselves and draw on our own experiences. We don't look at our characters as different species.

The New Colossus has fewer boss fights than The New Order. What prompted that change?
We decided early on that we were going to use the main gameplay vocabulary throughout the game. Usually a boss fight is like environmental puzzles or "shoot the weak spots" but we didn't want the player be retrained for new opposition. We wanted them to be able to approach with the tools and knowledge that they had gained throughout the game so it wasn't a completely different experience.

Will your timeline choice at the beginning of both The New Order and The New Colossus, where you choose between saving two comrades, have a big effect on the story in the planned third game?
We have some very strong ideas about where we want to take things, but it all depends on what you as a player consider meaningful. I think in terms of the narrative, there are more meaningful differences here than The New Order. Depending on how you approach the game, you can get two different endings, and so for this game, I think the ending scene is pretty dramatically different but it's also a s---load of other stuff that's different throughout the game. ◆

The Good

THE TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES have been announced as DLC characters for NetherRealm's DC Comics fighter Injustice 2. Fighter Pack 3 also adds The Atom and Enchantress, but as of the time of this writing no release date has been given for when the Turtles will be available.

The Bad

Titanfall developer **RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT** has been acquired by Electronic Arts, with sources within and near the studio telling us that some at Respawn are nervous about being owned by a large publisher again. Respawn founder Zampella and other devs at the studio did not like their treatment under their last large owner, Activision.

Fans are also trepidatious about the arrangement and how it may affect the franchise, but Zampella wasn't worried about the quality of the studio's games or possibly being shut down after acquisition by EA (like previous developers like Westwood and Visceral). "Anyone who is a fan of Respawn should trust us that what we are doing what we think is best for the future of Respawn and our games," Zampella said.

The Ugly

THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION (chairman Ajit Pai, shown) is expected in mid-December to vote to repeal the 2015 rules underpinning net neutrality, possibly paving the way for different internet pay lanes, removal of oversight of broadband providers, and the blocking and/or slowing of content. Gamers will be particularly affected by the vote given the bandwidth required from ISPs for increasing download sizes and online gameplay.

Quotable

"There's a world where it gets easier and easier to move that code around – where we may not have to do an annual release. We can really think about those games as a 365-day, live service."

Electronic Arts CEO Andrew Wilson tells Bloomberg that the annual release of EA Sports titles may change.

MINSTER CITY COUNCIL
SIR
EDWARD
ELGAR
COMPOSER
1857 – 1934
PENED AND RECORDED
IN THESE STUDIOS
ON 12th NOVEMBER
1931
MI RECORDS U.K.

FINAL FANTASY XV: ONE YEAR LATER

by Kimberley Wallace

Looking at how this crucial game for the series has grown and where it's headed

It seemed like Final Fantasy XV had the odds stacked against it. Coming off the divisive Final Fantasy XIII and its spin-offs, a grueling development cycle spanning over a decade, and a change in directors midway through, the game had a lot to prove. Many questioned if the series could stay relevant in modern times where open-world RPGs like The Elder Scrolls and The Witcher dominate the sales charts. Final Fantasy XV marked a big change for the franchise with a more open structure and action battle system. Much was riding on its success and, thankfully, it did what it needed to: earning accolades and reaching global sales of 6 million faster than any Final Fantasy entry to date. But perhaps its greatest achievement is its post-launch content, with a steady stream of free updates, paid DLC, and a multiplayer expansion. This model is different than anything Square Enix has done before with a single-player Final Fantasy game. We visited Square Enix's studios in Japan to chat with the team, look back on how the game has changed through its first year, and see what's in store for the future.

The Prompto DLC remains the most popular with fans

A New Approach

When director Hajime Tabata took the reins from Tetsuya Nomura back in 2014, he knew he had a lot to tackle not only on the game, but also with fans disappointed at the project's lack of updates and continual delays. Instead of keeping things secretive, as Square Enix had done in the past, he openly enlisted the help of fans for feedback. He has always been fond of this direct communication style, and considered their opinions in the development process. "We had such a curiosity about how they'd take the game and how they'd react to it because obviously this is not a game we set out to do on the same kind of direction as the previous entries," he says. "We deliberately took [the series] in a new direction to try and expand and make it something new. We were excited to see what the traditional fans would think, but a bit scared at the same time as well."

Tabata said the feedback was good, but he also heard many negative comments. That didn't discourage him, though; he looked at it as an opportunity to improve those elements, even after launch. "We were told by the fans what we should be improving and expanding on in the series," he says. To this day, the team keeps fans in the loop with a video feature called Active Time Report, which highlights the game's continual progress.

Since launch, Square Enix has been dishing out improvements – ranging from off-road modifications for the Regalia and an alternative take on the penultimate chapter – to fun content, such as a Moogle Chocobo Carnival and Assassin's Festival, a collaboration with Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed franchise. Adding such substantial post-launch content is a radically different approach for a company steeped in tradition, but it was important to Tabata. "This is a game we kept people waiting for for such a long time," he explains. "We felt [that] rather than having the traditional model where you release the game and then say, 'Okay, that's it,' we'd rather go for the service-type model and take a bit longer to give back to those people because they've been waiting so long – we felt we had to give back to them somehow."

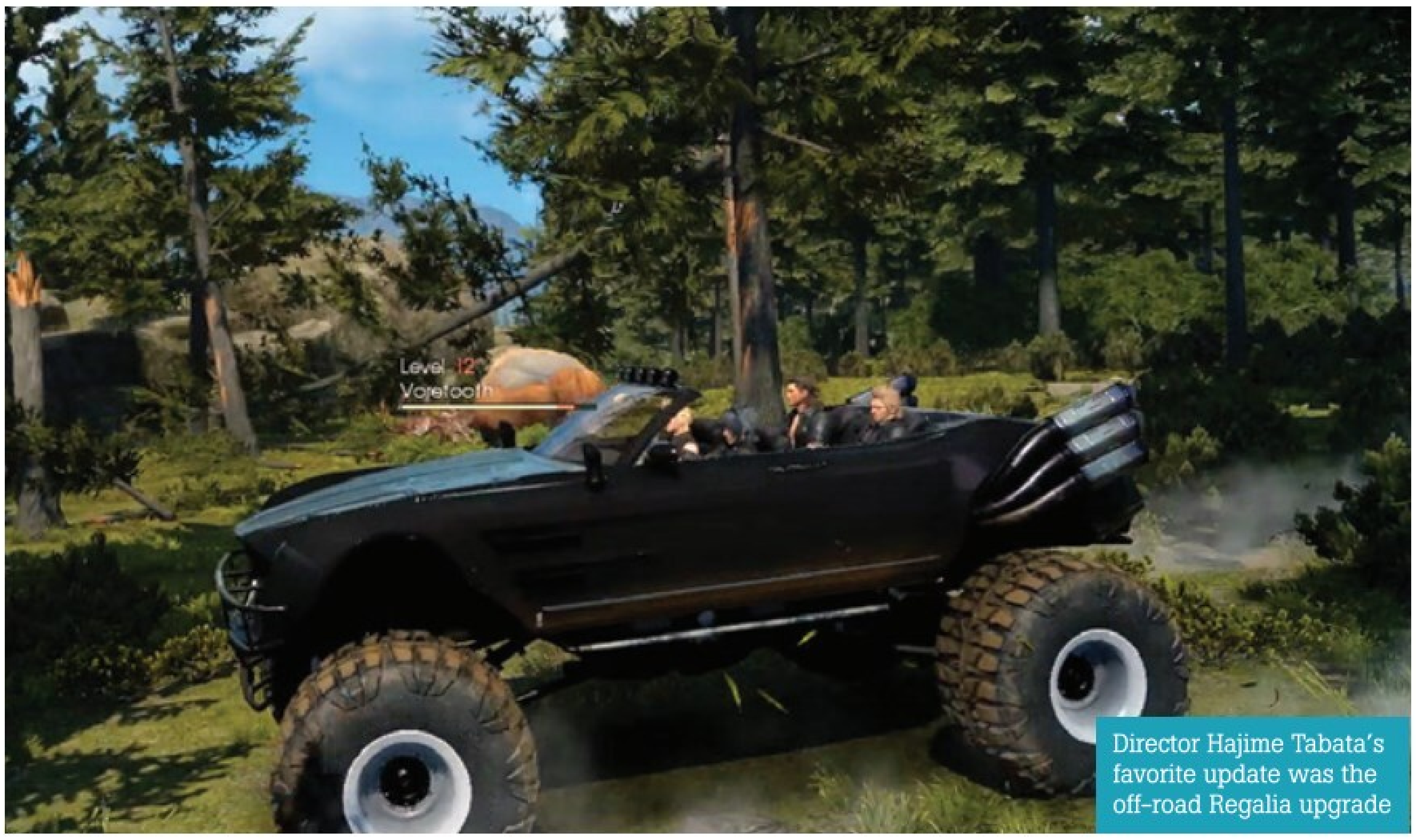
Since this model was unfamiliar to Square, Tabata acknowledges it wasn't conveyed well to players at launch. "What we could have done a little bit better was communicating the game as a service model and shared that information with the new players right from the start and gave them a [better] idea of what they can expect and what this whole overall project is about."

Square Enix largely considers Final Fantasy XV a success, both from a financial standpoint and for bringing in new fans. Its profitability made the free updates possible. "The reason we decided to do [ongoing free updates] was looking at the day-one sales and the profits we made back on the game," he says. "It's also a way to thank the users who bought the game and give back to them as well. That was a big factor in deciding to do that one year of free updates. Of course that was a very limited period, limited to the first year of the game. We have to reexamine that and look at what we're doing for our plan next year."

The growth of the fan base is also starting to show. "I think since the release of Final Fantasy XV, there are a lot more people now who have played Final Fantasy and even if they haven't, they have at least heard about it, or they never had any interest at all in Final Fantasy and they got a little bit [curious]," Tabata says. "That's one big change that I've certainly felt myself happening."

All The Spin-Offs

Final Fantasy XV had its share of related projects spanning various media, from film to mobile games. This has caused some confusion about what all these parts entail and their necessity to the lore. But is it too much? Has the team felt it may be diluting the identity of Final Fantasy XV? "That's something we are, in fact, very concerned about," says director Hajime Tabata. "What we're trying to do is actually quite simple in essence, but it's something that maybe is quite difficult to get across. I think we're going to have to work a bit harder to get that message across in the future. Obviously, the people who bought the main game are the most important to us. It's a group of people we feel we have to value very highly, so expanding on the main game and improving it for those people is our number one priority. That's what we're really aiming for and it's showing in what we're doing. We also want to expand the audience and bring new people into it and these side games are a part of that."



Director Hajime Tabata's favorite update was the off-road Regalia upgrade

ASSASSINS FESTIV

Tabata also takes note of how the demographic of the fan base shifted with this entry. The main volume of players used to be in their mid-30s, but now it's mid-20s. "That's not saying the fans in their 30s and 40s don't like the game; they're still in there as well, but I think it shows the amount of time and investment we put in this game," he says. "The fact that we've expanded on the demographic of the user base there is a very big achievement and very important to the future of the franchise."

This past year also included episodes focused on individual characters and a multiplayer expansion for purchase to keep hardcore fans invested. However, that's hardly the end of the team's plans to support the game in the future. "We actually only had a proper plan for the game up until the end of this year, and we were sitting down and like, 'Okay, what are we going to do after that? Is that going to be the end? Where are we going to take this?' We decided the best way [to figure that out] was to discuss it with the fans and get their opinions and find what they [still] wanted from the game. So we've done that now. We discussed with fans in Europe, America, and Asia as well. And we pretty much decided we want to carry on after that to finish off at the end of next year."

Improving The Game

Most fans' biggest complaints have already been addressed, from the problematic chapter 13 to the addition of New Game Plus. However, Tabata and his team feel there's room for improvement and even new features left to implement. One of his biggest goals in the next year is to add more to the story and lore. "There is still something missing, not quite satisfactory yet, in the way the story explains itself and the information you get there – that's what I think I need to still focus on," Tabata says. As to what this entails, Tabata said he wants to go deeper into the background of some characters and their personalities alongside explaining more about Eos itself. "There's more of a backstory to this world that this game takes place in than [the game] had," he says.

Tabata also couldn't help teasing more than just story enhancements. "There's also one other thing – a completely new gameplay experience I want to provide to players of XV as well. I can't tell you what that is yet, though. We're currently thrashing through the plans for that and getting it into shape, so we can announce exactly what that is at the beginning of next year."

He also clarified more regarding future DLC. "The important thing is [that] we want to release DLC that's closely linked to the main game – the main story – and has a strong influence on that, rather than something somewhat peripheral and unrelated. That's the kind of content we're looking at."

Biggest Missteps

Looking back on the first year, we couldn't help but discuss some of the biggest lessons learned along the way. After all, hindsight is 20/20. Director Hajime Tabata was candid about the struggles of implementing a more open world. He said the challenges went beyond just the technological side of things. "You really do need to alter the way the whole project is approached from developmental point of view," he says.

Tabata said at the end of 2015, the team was just putting all the parts of the game that were being developed separately together. "There were so many issues and problems that we only became aware of in that time and I think that linked into why we didn't get the game to exact level we wanted for the final quality," he explains. "The traditional model involves ramping up the number of staff involved on a project as you go along, especially at the final part of the project. If you do that there are just some issues that don't become obvious at the start. If we'd do it again, we'd use a completely different model and have that full development style right from the start."

Tabata also discussed how he wished having an open-world design and then swapping halfway to a more linear style was handled better. "I think looking back on it, it would have been nice to have that as a more gradual transition rather than an abrupt change."

Looking at data, he also noticed a big difference between when newcomers and veterans put down the game. "The place where most of the core-series fans found difficult or quit was chapter 13, but the new players, a lot of them quit at the point where it switched over to the linear style. I think perhaps there's a reason for that there, and we should have done something about that".

Making Multiplayer Matter

Final Fantasy XV didn't stop with updating its single-player experience, it also released a multiplayer expansion called Comrades, which is included in the season pass or can be purchased separately for $19.99. "The core pillar at the center of the game is the experience of going on a journey with your comrades – your friends," Tabata explains. "We felt because we created such a detailed and exciting world, people would naturally want a mode where they could explore and experience it in another way together with friends. That was a natural progression we felt."

Comrades is more than just an excuse to experience XV's combat with your friends, as the expansion actually fills in the gap between the game's final two chapters. "The story told within Comrades covers the missing 10 years of time at the very end of the story," Tabata says. In it, you create your own character, a member of Kingsglaive, the Lucian royal family's special unit forces. "As survivors, players will get to know how the Kingsglaive soldiers felt toward Noctis and friends, along with how they were able to provide support for them during the time gap," says Comrades director Kazuya Takahashi. "What we wanted to have was at the end of this single-player game, all the players come together and do things in this world [which] will ultimately have an effect on the [initial] game itself," Tabata teases.

The team is aware most people play Final Fantasy for a single-player experience, so part of the challenge was figuring out the best way to bring fans into a multiplayer setting. "Since the majority of Final Fantasy XV players prefer to play single-player games, one of the most important points that we tried to achieve is to provide those players with an easy entry point to experience multiplayer games as well," Takahashi explains. "As such, we did our best to remove elements that trigger players on a team to blame a player for their mistakes. For that same reason, we developed A.I. party members/Comrades for those who want the option to play as single player."

Just like the base game, Comrades will receive regular updates with new content. At the time of this publication, whether or not any of those pieces of content will be paid remains to be seen. "We're still determining the specifics regarding the road map, but we would like to support Comrades as much as possible," Takahashi says. "In a Comrades update, we will be making Noctis, Gladio, Prompto and Ignis playable. Additionally, we're planning on including additions like Gears, Royal Sigil, Chef, and Outposts that haven't been released yet in Version 1.00." Right now the level cap is 50, but Takahashi says they're also planning on increasing the that with a future update.

Paving The Way For The Future

While there's still plenty more on the way for Final Fantasy XV in the next year, Tabata and his team are already planning how to properly conclude it in a satisfying way. "We've had this idea for quite a while now of how we're going to bring the game to the end," he says. "We call it, 'The end of the journey – the end of our journey.' Again, it's a project that we've come all the way from the beginning alongside our fans and we want to bring it to an end together with those fans."

Time will tell if the success of this content model will continue with other Square titles. "I think it's more of a case that there are more options available for future Final Fantasy developers – this idea of a service model and as a way you interact with the fan base of the game," Tabata says. "It's not a single point in time, it's carrying on in continuous contact with them. I think that kind of option, that kind of model, is something [Square Enix] may want to take up for future Final Fantasies." ◈

OUTRAGEOUS MICROTRANSACTIONS

by Jeff Marchiafava

High-Priced Horseplay

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

Oblivion's $2.50 horse armor DLC is nothing compared to the other entries on this list, but that's precisely the point. Bethesda didn't just pave the way for absurd and overpriced microtransactions; it proved to the wider industry that there's a thriving market for it. The rest is sad and depressing history.

Holy Ships!

Star Citizen

Star Citizen is the used-car dealership of video games. The perpetually delayed MMO still has no release date in sight, but the online store is doing gangbusters! In it ~~suckers~~ players can purchase dozens of ships, ranging from $20 to $3,000. Maybe they'll even get to play the game someday!

Paying Out The Caboose

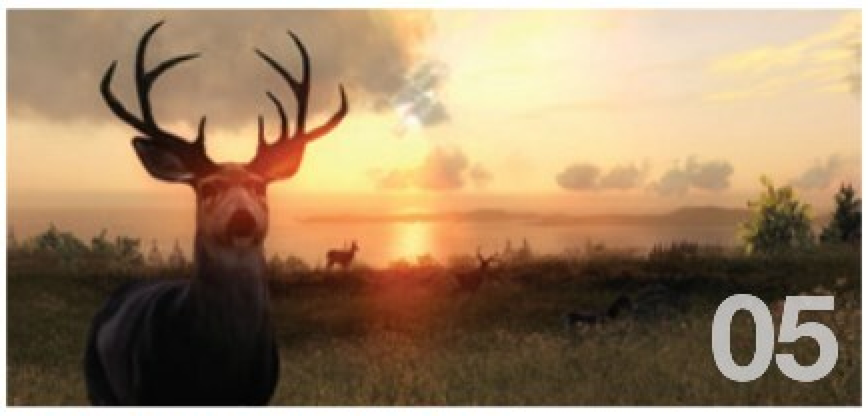
Train Simulator

If you ever wondered what being a train conductor is like, you should just stop and become one in real life. Then when you get your first month's salary, you might be able to afford Train Simulator's DLC, which currently totals over $7,000 for all its various wagons and routes.

Geico For Your Gekko

Metal Gear Solid V

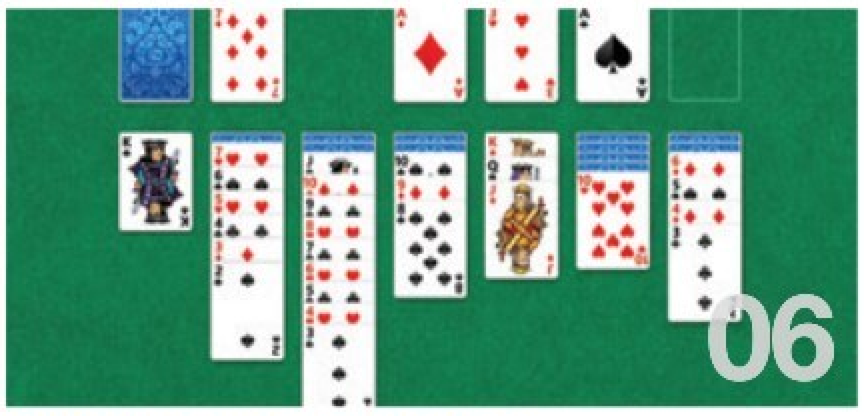
Building up your Mother Base in MGS V is satisfying. Having your time-gated resources stolen by other players? Not so much. Luckily, Konami has a deplorable solution: Players can spend real cash to cover their losses for a few days. It's almost as fun as buying insurance in real life!



Deer Urine. No Really

TheHunter Classic

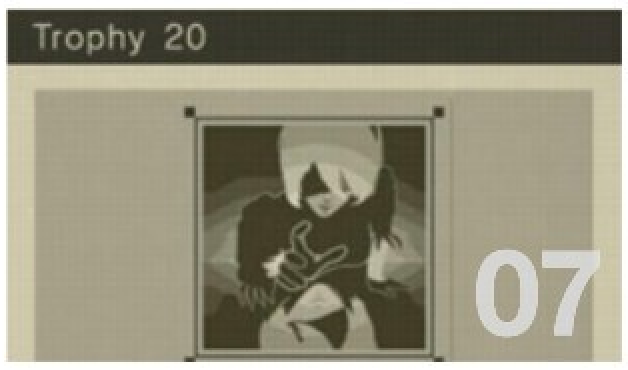
Technically deer urine is only one item in TheHunter's $15 Deer Hunter DLC pack. You also get clothes, calls, and hunting licenses, which are required to actually shoot anything – and the three-month permits run out in real-time. That deer pee is sounding pretty good right now, isn't it?



Subscribe To Solitaire?!

Solitaire, Windows 10

Solitaire has been a staple of Windows since…well, the beginning of Windows. It's a miracle it took Microsoft this long to screw it up, but boy did they ever. The insane excitement of Klondike is now broken up by video ads, and you'll have to pay $2 a month to remove them.



Achievement Aggrievement

Nier Automata

Trophies are a virtual symbol of a gamer's hard-earned accomplishments. They're also ultimately meaningless, which is why we have mixed feelings about Nier Automata straight-up selling them for in-game gold. The real surprise? Square Enix not including a real-money purchase option.

Diamonds Are Forever… Or Not

Curiosity: What's Inside the Cube

Remember Peter Molyneux's cube-tapping mobile game that promised to change one lucky winner's life forever? It didn't. But you could've changed your bank account forever by purchasing a £50,000 Diamond Chisel. It let you break blocks faster. Video games!

Virtual Jukebox

Guitar Hero Live

Guitar Hero was already built on a respected and lucrative DLC format, but that didn't stop Activision from trying to screw it up one more time. In order to play a specific song in Guitar Hero Live, you had to shell out one-time-use Play tokens. Kind of like a jukebox…that you paid $60 for.

Everything

Dungeon Keeper

EA took Dungeon Keeper's premise of demonic minions hoarding gold a little too literally. The publisher filled its mobile remake with so many in-app purchases, time gates, and premium currencies that the British Advertising Standards Authority ruled they legally couldn't call it "free-to-play." ◆

RISK TAK

How Indie Developers Are Embracing Novel Ways To Tell Stories

by Elise Favis

Spoiler warning for the following games: What Remains of Edith Finch, Night in the Woods, and The Beginner's Guide

ERS

Chop.Chop.

Chop. Chop. Chop. Lewis Finch slices off fish heads one by one, moving them across a conveyor belt with ease. The task is laborious but rhythmic. It's only a matter of time before monotony takes over, and his attention diverts. In his mind, a maze takes form, and while nondescript at first, it soon expands and becomes a colorful kingdom. As the player, you harmoniously navigate through this fantastical land while also beheading salmon in the cannery, until this kingdom consumes your entire screen. In a final, shocking scene, the imaginary world and the cannery collide in gruesome fashion, as Lewis steps up to a guillotine in front of his empire. He bows down, willingly facing the same fate as the fish.

This memorable scene is one of many creative short stories found in What Remains of Edith Finch, an adventure game from Giant Sparrow. The player controls both realities seamlessly, until the kingdom takes over the screen – and Lewis – completely. By blending interactivity and narrative in a novel way, it quickly became one of the most thought-provoking games of 2017, and this is partly due to its ambition and willingness to take chances.

While most big-budget games are shifting toward multiplayer-focused experiences and microtransaction business models, small teams of intrepid developers continue to push the boundaries for game narratives by taking offbeat and fascinating risks. When done right, these stories inspire and captivate.

In the past few years, we've seen a surge of games that tell stories in unique ways. Tacoma, an adventure game from the creators of Gone Home, told a compelling narrative through holographic sequences players could pause, play, and rewind. Others, like Her Story, rethink the storytelling format by having the player search through camera footage to piece together a non-linear mystery. We spoke with several developers to learn how these small studios became overachievers in the storytelling department.

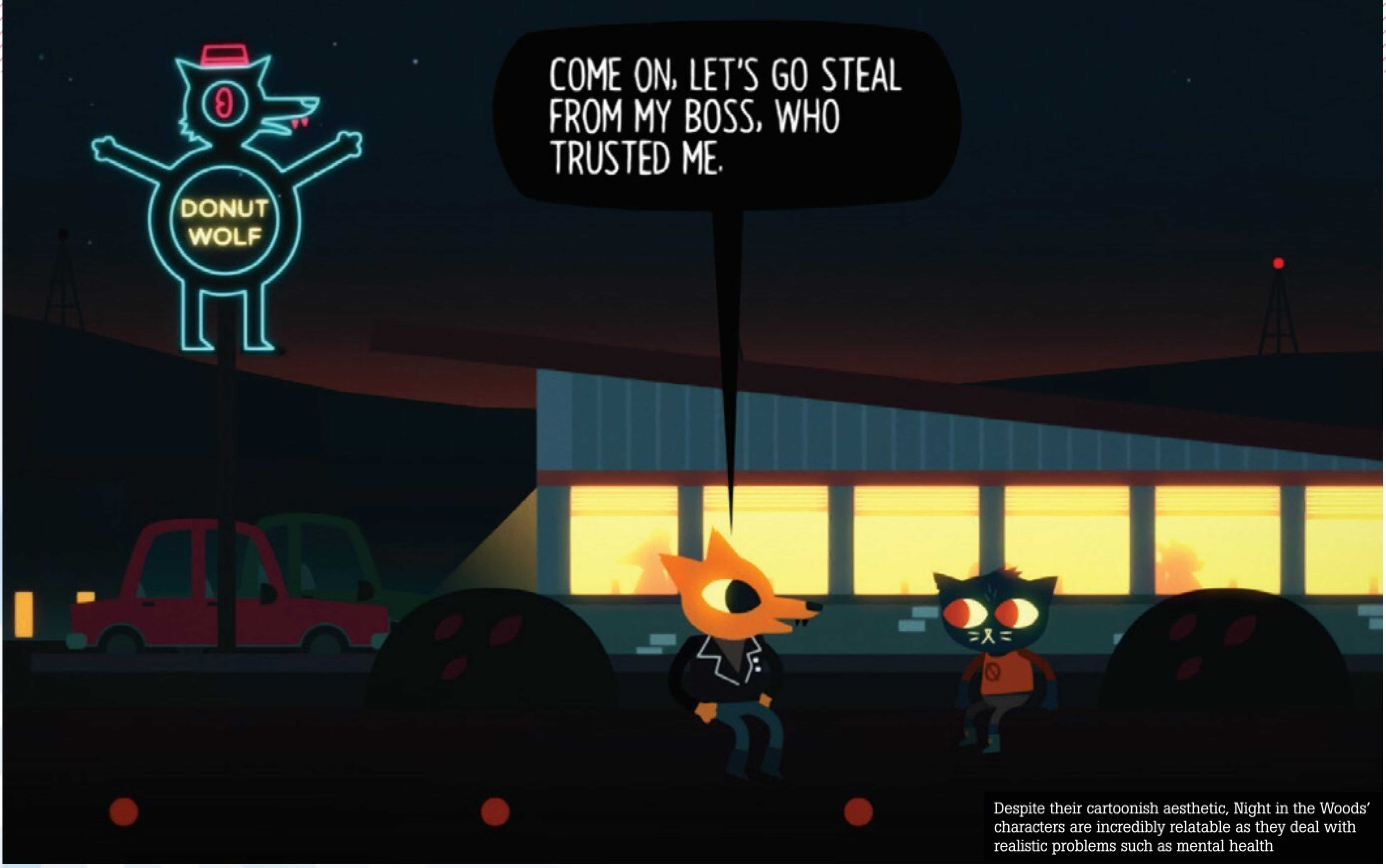
THE VALUE OF FLAWED CHARACTERS

The best stories aren't always about invincible heroes or treacherous quests. While it can make for an exciting premise, several other components come into play to build a meaningful tale. Unfortunately, these factors don't always tie together well in video games. A script can suffer when writers have to insert a storyline late in development, or they aren't involved enough in the development process to make the narrative fit seamlessly with the gameplay. This can create problems such as narrative dissonance, a disconnect between the player and characters' actions, which can impede a script's believability. For example, many fans found it hard to believe that Far Cry 3's protagonist Jason could instantly switch from parachuting with friends to becoming a bloodthirsty killer.

Smaller-budget games, like Night in the Woods, are often created by tight-knit groups where art, mechanics, and story are all cross-referenced between the creators. Night in the Woods' emphasis on storytelling and relatable characters is largely successful because the three people behind it were all on the same page, and even took inspiration from their personal lives.

Night in the Woods writer Bethany Hockenberry believes the game works because they wrote the characters as "human beings." Mae, the protagonist, is a 20-year-old anthropomorphic cat who isn't instantly likable the same way Uncharted's Nathan Drake might be, and isn't on an epic quest like The Legend of Zelda's Link. Despite her cartoonish aesthetic, Mae is a lot more human than you'd think. After dropping out of college, she returns to her economically downtrodden Rust Belt hometown. She feels "stuck" in comparison to her peers. Mae is average; she's a lot like you and me. That's what makes her story stand out.

What Remains of Edith Finch



Despite their cartoonish aesthetic, Night in the Woods' characters are incredibly relatable as they deal with realistic problems such as mental health

"With characters, you have to give them failures," explains Night in the Woods developer Scott Benson. "We're used to having characters in games who are better than us in every way. Mae isn't smarter than the player, and she isn't more emotionally proficient than the player. The only thing she's really good at is walking on phone wires. Otherwise, you as the player probably have your life together more than she does. I think that is way more interesting."

Mae deals with issues familiar to our own struggles, as well as ones inspired by challenges the creators have faced themselves. For example, later in the game Mae experiences a dissociative incident, where she describes the world as meaningless shapes. This scene is inspired by true events that happened to Benson.

At age six, Benson was watching a VHS tape of the animated *Robin Hood* film when he experienced his first dissociative incident. Similar to Mae, Benson had trouble distinguishing between reality and fiction. "I seriously went into the woods after and cried," he says. "It's so sad and stupid sounding, but that was kind of an inspiration."

Several Night in the Woods characters deal with mental illness, from bipolar disorder to depression. It's explored and evoked in a realistic manner, emphasizing that it's just part of life. For example, Mae's best friend, an impulsive yellow wolf named Gregg, has manic episodes that come across as personality quirks. However, deeper conversations with him reveal his inner moral conflict about whether he's a good person.

While it can be difficult to portray themes like these effectively, the team says they never felt any hesitation. "So much of the game has a lot of autobiography from all of us, in big and small ways, that there was a bit of a confidence that came with that," Benson says.

While Mae isn't instantly likeable, the creators believe that her characteristics of sympathy and loyalty balance that out. The team doesn't believe characters should be completely unlikeable, but instead have balance to their personalities and reasons behind their faults. Most of all, they need to be relatable to their audience.

"To me, she seems more relatable than your average video game character," says Night in the Woods game designer Alec Holowka. "Going in, I was even expecting [Mae] to have more issues and be more difficult to get on the same page with, but I think the way Scott and Bethany wrote her was actually sympathetic. Not too sympathetic, but she's definitely a good person at heart and she doesn't necessarily know how to communicate that very well."

IF ANYONE'S GONNA RUIN YOUR NIGHT, MAE, IT REALLY SHOULD BE YOU.

PROVOCATIVE NARRATIVES

Flawed characters can make for a more nuanced story. Developer Davey Wreden, the creator of both The Stanley Parable and The Beginner's Guide, took this to an extreme with his last project.

The Beginner's Guide is a story-driven experience about how a game developer named Coda became consumed by his need to create. Narrated by Wreden himself, the game guides the player through several short, often unfinished video games created by Coda. As we are curated through these thought-provoking projects, Wreden gives his own interpretations of Coda's work and psychoanalyzes his personality. For example, several of Coda's games take place in prisons, symbolizing the feeling of entrapment and isolation. By the end of the game, Wreden informs the player that these games were packaged together, modified, and sold without Coda's consent. In other words, he insinuates that The Beginner's Guide is stolen property.

Although it's a fictional piece, Wreden's use of his own name for the main character, and with the narration's autobiographical tone, many players expressed confusion – even outrage – when fooled by this deception. It's a consequence Wreden was fully aware of when he made the game, and he felt it was necessary to tell this story.

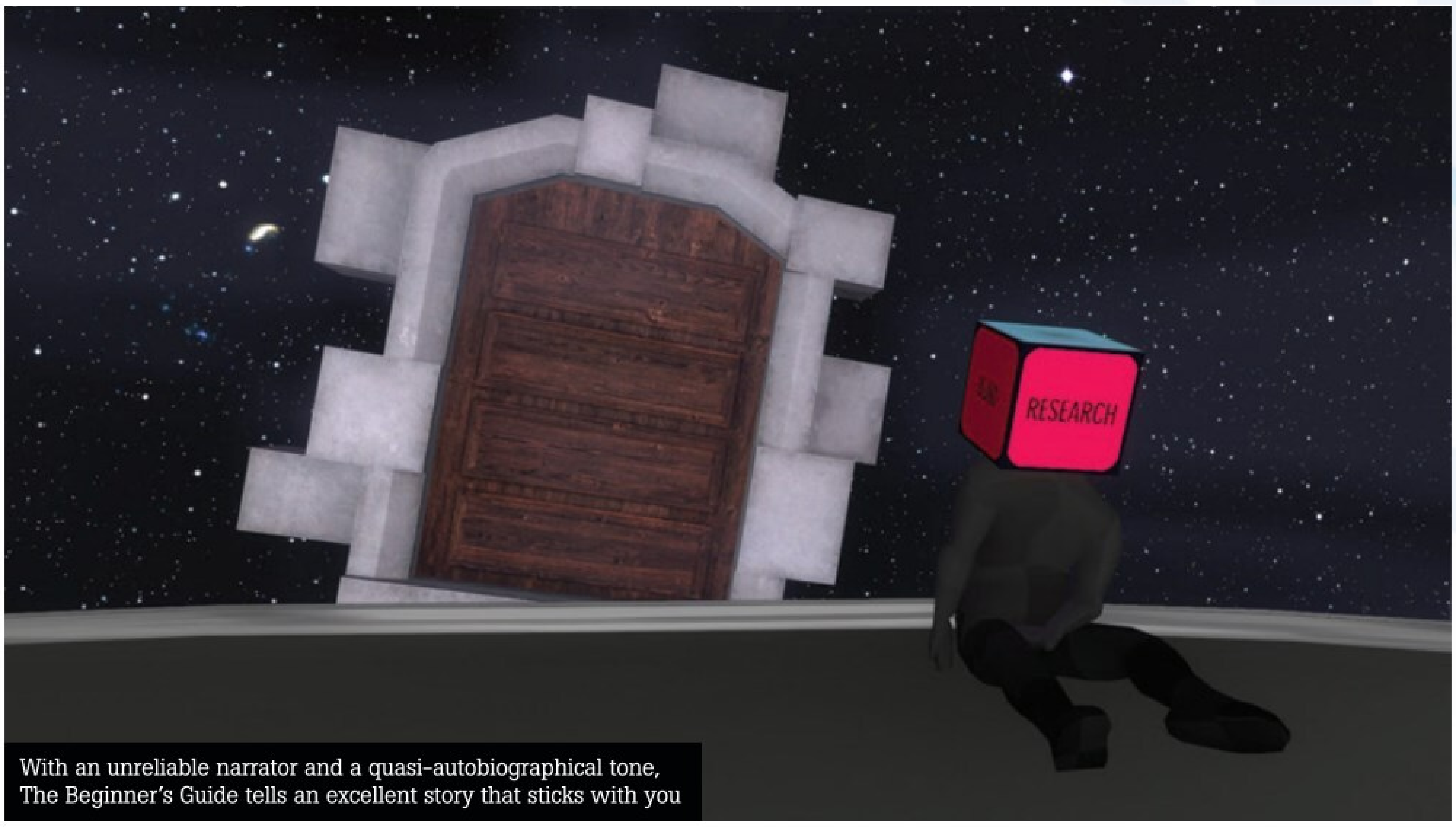
Despite it being provocative, Wreden says that wasn't his intent going in. "I think the fact that some people may have considered it shocking and provocative probably means that I did something right with the story, but it was not the intention," he says. "It's more of an interesting side effect."

Making it provocative wasn't the intention, but attempting to get an adverse and wider scale of reactions was one of Wreden's motives. "I guess more of the intention was to do something that was a lot more likely to spread. You know, that the shots were going to spread a little bit wider in terms of where they land on the reaction spectrum."

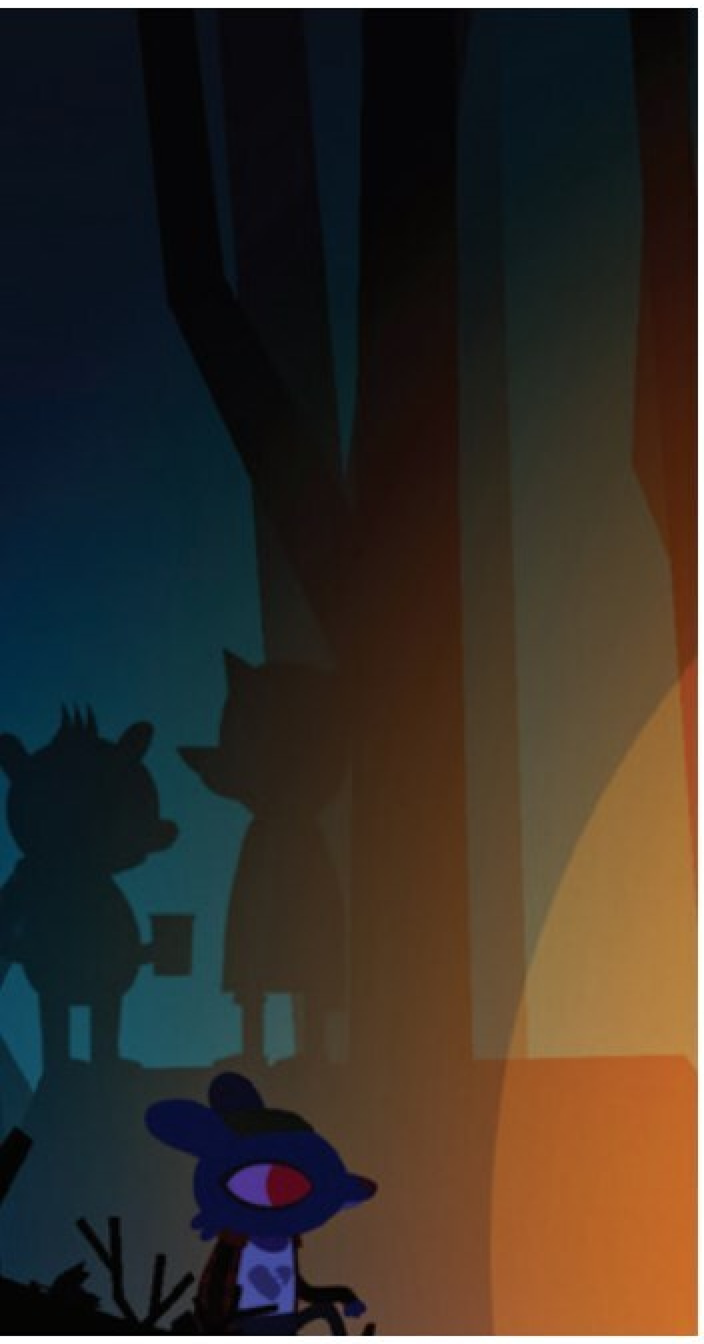
The Beginner's Guide, however, doesn't just rest on shock value. Though it's a fictionalized tale, Wreden stresses that The Beginner's Guide is just as autobiographical as his other works. Many interpretations made by in-game Wreden about Coda's work align with the real Wreden's own sentiments about creativity and the need for validation. It makes for an intimate and personal story, giving an inside look at Wreden's mind, how he handles interpersonal relationships, and the ups and downs that the creation process has on the psyche.

"Everything I do is autobiographical," he says. "It's honest to God no less autobiographical than Stanley Parable. Truly it isn't. I'm really uninterested in making things that aren't autobiographical."

The Beginner's Guide largely works because a lot of the narrative threads are left to your interpretation. Is Coda real? Is he just a projection of Wreden's own complexities? Can we trust Wreden's narrative at all? How much you piece together is up to you, and everyone's experience playing the game can be a little different depending on what they take away from it. Some stories benefit from that ambiguity, and The Beginner's Guide is far from alone.



With an unreliable narrator and a quasi-autobiographical tone, The Beginner's Guide tells an excellent story that sticks with you



The Beginner's Guide

PIECING THE STORY TOGETHER

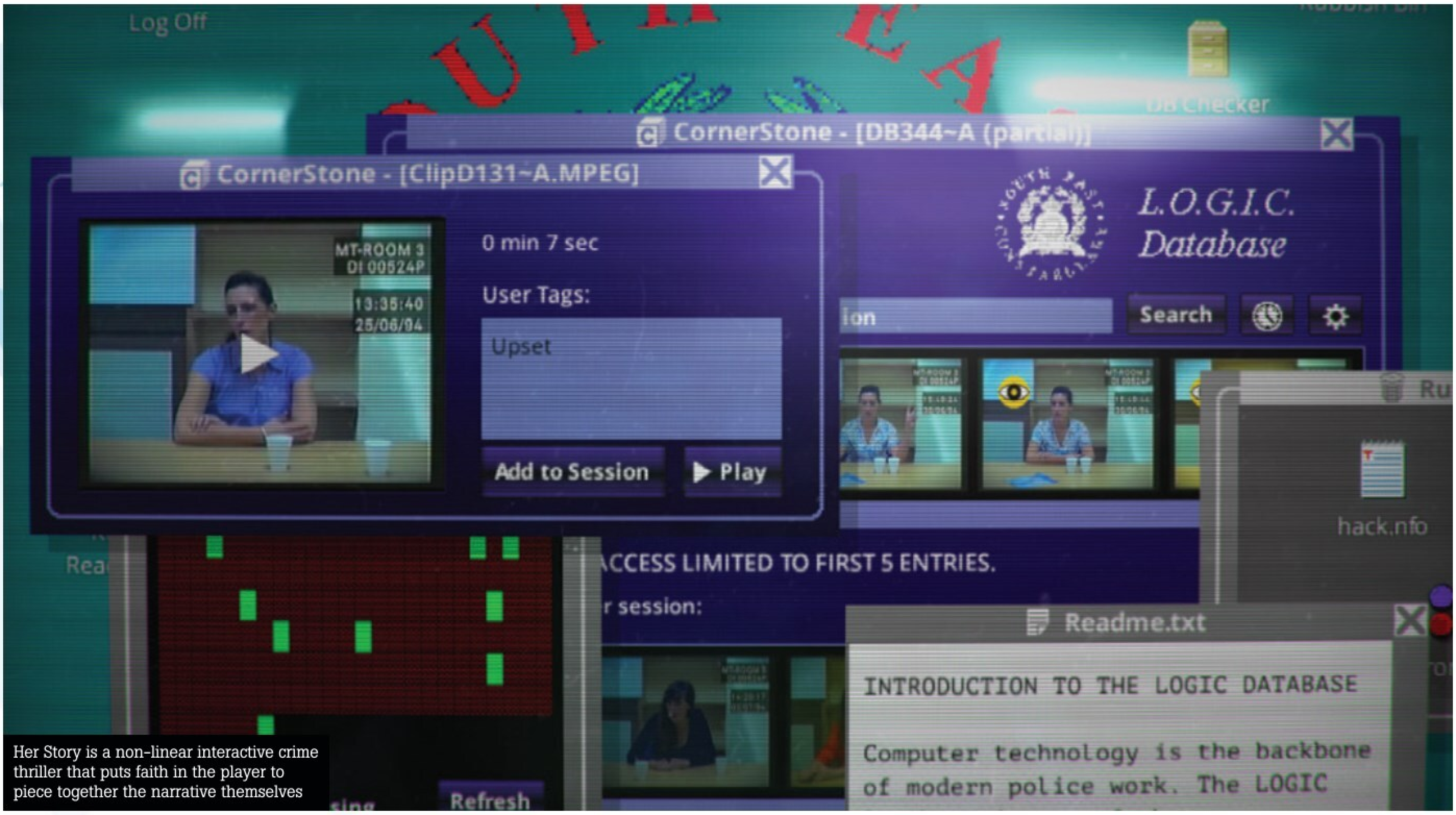
Many crime thrillers put faith in their audience, at least to a degree. Uncovering a fictional mystery involves some cognitive work of your own. This is a concept that game designer Sam Barlow took to a new level with his piece of interactive fiction, Her Story.

Her Story sets players in front of a detective's computer desktop, where they scour through video footage of police interviews to uncover a murder mystery revolving around a female suspect. Its sole mechanic involves typing keywords into a search bar to find the next video, which hopefully aids you in your quest for truth. Keywords can include phrases you heard in the last video, or require more attention to detail such as decoding Morse Code messages.

"It's an interactive story that doesn't necessarily branch in a way you'd commonly expect an interactive story to," Barlow says.

Barlow knew that most people who would play the game were already familiar with most tropes and twists found in crime thrillers. Her Story doesn't necessarily steer away from that predictability, but it successfully puts faith in the player and trusts that they're intelligent enough to piece together the truth themselves. The keywords are like breadcrumbs, and Barlow explains that the player's knowledge of these tropes isn't a setback in Her Story, but instead a tool they can facilitate.

"Here they are navigating a story that suddenly feels more personal to them," Barlow says. "The game is validating the story they're putting together, and it feels like there's this kind of dialogue going on. I think it successfully proves why we should tell this kind of story in an interactive way."



ACCESS LIMITED TO FIRST 5 ENTRIES.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LOGIC DATABASE

Computer technology is the backbone of modern police work. The LOGIC

Her Story is a non-linear interactive crime thriller that puts faith in the player to piece together the narrative themselves

Barlow's Follow-Up To Her Story

In 2017, Sam Barlow revealed that he's hard at work on a new project, titled Telling Lies, that has a similar format to Her Story. Though there was a lot of appetite from fans wanting a sequel to Her Story, Barlow says he "resisted" doing that until he found a way to make this new project feel just as fresh and different as his last.

"The ideas [behind Telling Lies] are different enough from Her Story that it feels risky – almost as risky as Her Story was," he says. "For me to do it, it has to feel exciting. It has to feel like I'm pushing something. There has to be the excitement and energy that this might not work."

Barlow says he's "pushing into a new genre" with his next game, and further exploring elements that made Her Story a success. "[With Her Story,] people were brought in with the murder-mystery hook. But once you get your teeth into it, you realize it's more of a character study. This kind of format is a very rich way to explore character and performance, so in Telling Lies, I'm doubling down on that."

He believes that this format broadens the audience, and tells "stories about characters that we haven't seen in video games before." With Telling Lies, he hopes that he can continue to make interactive narratives as accessible as possible, while also introducing stories that have a meaningful impact on the player.

VIGNETTE STORYTELLING

Giant Sparrow's What Remains of Edith Finch also rethinks the format of interactive storytelling. This adventure game uses vignettes to tell a larger, connecting narrative in a deeply compelling way.

What Remains of Edith Finch tells the story of a young girl who is the last surviving member of the Finch family. To find out why her relatives all met untimely or grisly deaths, Edith returns to her abandoned family home and explores its inner secrets. Throughout the game, the player is treated to an anthology of interactive short stories. Each uses a specific mechanic, and sheds light on a family member's death in a creative way. For example, in one you flip through a comic about child star Barbara Finch's last moments, which plays out like a slasher film. In another, you control a camera, and each photograph you snap progresses the story to its grim conclusion.

Creative director Ian Dallas says one of the challenges the team faced was trying to strike a balance between entertainment and tone. "I think we got better over time at recognizing what stories were actually a good fit tonally for us, but then also had mechanics that were interesting," he says.

This was particularly difficult for Lewis Finch's short story, which has the player cutting fish in a cannery that slowly transforms into an imaginative world that Lewis thinks up to escape the rote task. Throughout this vignette, you continuously chop the heads of fish while also exploring a majestic kingdom that eventually takes over the entire experience.

"The main mistake we make [with the short stories] is that we make them too complicated," Dallas says. "When we thought about [Lewis' story] and were talking about what we wanted, and drawing things on the whiteboard, we had what we thought was a pretty clear sense of how much we would need in terms of mechanical complexity in order to keep it interesting. We wanted it to feel mundane, but interesting enough that players would still be engaged with it."

Dallas says it took years to refine the prototype, which went through rigorous changes until finally, playtesters told them that it worked. "After enough players have a terrible experience, eventually you get to something where people are like 'Oh, well that just seemed to magically work."

REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

To Dallas, what makes What Remains of Edith Finch most engaging is its interactivity and exploration. With a sense of presence in a virtual world, Dallas believes it can create for some powerful experiences and that they "activate your brain" in a particular way that's different from a passive story told through television or print. He hopes to see more novel and interesting ideas in interactive storytelling, especially narratives that are more inclusive, such as portraying multicultural and queer characters.

"I hope that in the future we have more diverse perspectives, because there's a lot of interesting stories out there that video games haven't had a chance to explore," he says.

Barlow has high hopes too for the medium. He believes meaningful interactive stories can help book publishers, television producers, and other leaders in media better understand the potential of interactivity so that they too can benefit from more personal storytelling.

Wreden, who is working on a secretive project that he claims will be very different from his past works, would also like to see change. He hopes games eventually rely less on traditional developmental concepts, such as progression and achieving goals. "I would really love to play more games that didn't rely on progression as their core mechanism," he says.

These creators help make the future of storytelling more promising by delving into themes, mechanics, and ideas in novel ways – and this is only the beginning. The indie scene continues to flourish, with more self-publishing options and crowdfunding possibilities to help game designers kickstart their passion projects. While triple-A continues to play it safe, it's clear indies have a step up in terms of innovations in storytelling, as they continue to experiment with creative techniques.

Giant Sparrow's What Remains of Edith Finch is an anthology of whimsically morbid short stories, revolving around a mysterious family curse

THE REBELLION AGAINST THE EMPIRE

Aggressive monetization in Star Wars Battlefront II draws the ire of fans

Earlier this year at Star Wars Celebration and E3, Electronic Arts debuted Star Wars Battlefront II to wide approval. The previous title in the series was a missed opportunity due to its lack of content at launch, a shallow progression system, extra maps and heroes that dripped out as paid DLC, and the absence of a single-player campaign. In that light, the sequel's playable single-player and multiplayer sessions at E3, as well as the announcement that all DLC for Battlefront II would be free, appeared to be big step forward for the franchise, appeasing fans and serving as evidence that the company could learn from its mistakes. But the honeymoon did not last. At the time of this writing, Battlefront II is in some ways worse than the 2015 title (read our review on page 82). Its microtransaction-focused structure and EA's poor communication about the game has both enraged and emboldened the community, resulting in the collision of capitalism and gamer activism. ***by Matthew Kato***

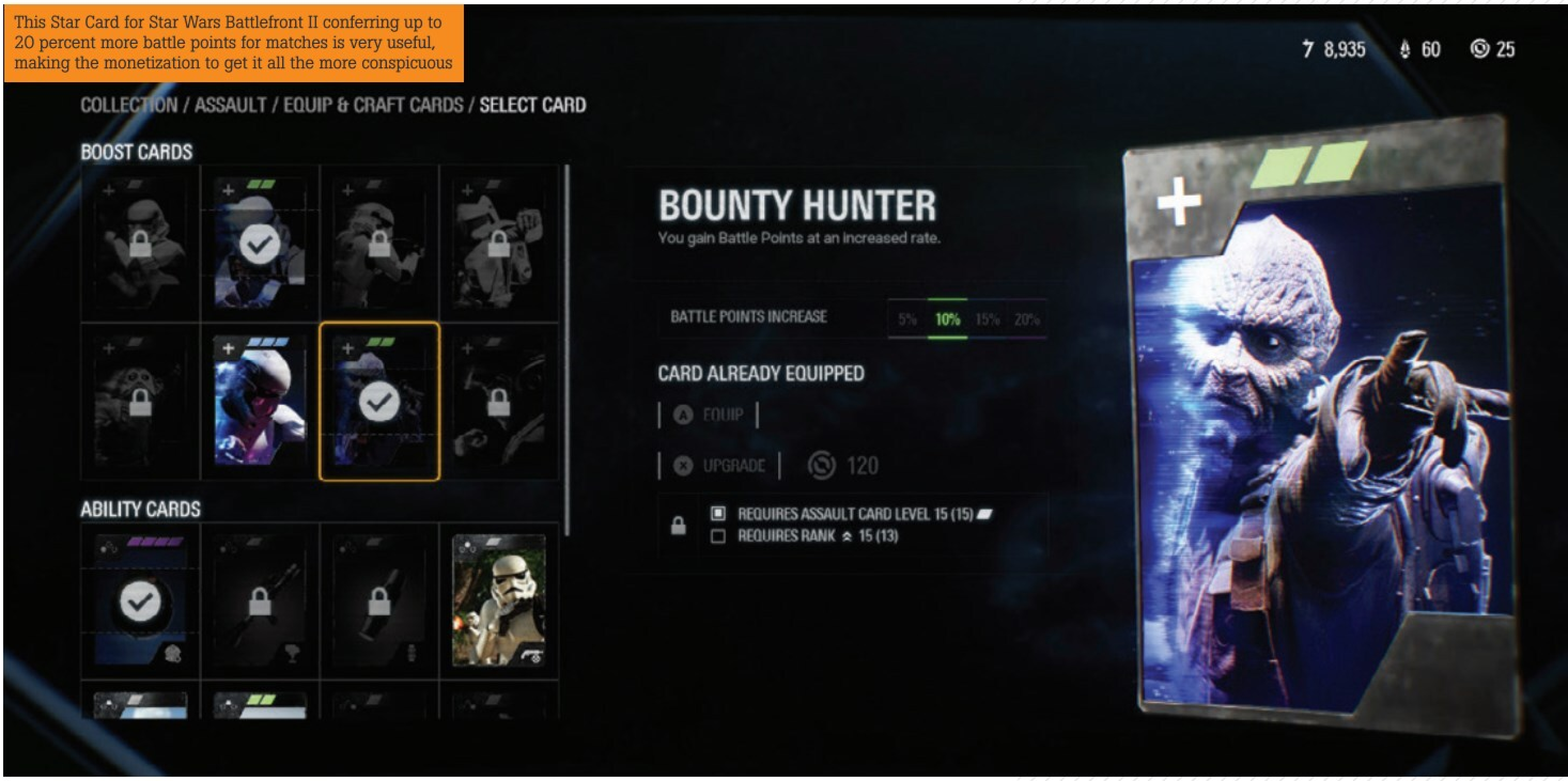
After E3, EA's marketing for the game focused on various aspects of the title such as the single-player and Starfighter Assault modes, but the hard questions didn't surface until the public multiplayer beta in early October. The beta confined important ability-conferring Star Cards to loot crates, raising the question whether in the final game players could pay real money to get a Star Card advantage over those who don't pay. After the beta, developer DICE announced it was making changes based on feedback from the beta in order to soften the pay-to-win appearance and further reward skill in the game's progression system.

From here the downward spiral began, as new details about Battlefront II's overall structure were revealed through the ensuing early access trial leading up to launch less than two weeks away. Fans reacted angrily upon learning heroes had to be unlocked before they could be used in a mode and that it would take approximately 40 hours to unlock a single hero. The game was more about time accrued than skill – thus paving the way for players to pay money to remedy their frustration with loot crates. They were also hostile because these fundamental details weren't outlined from the beginning. EA and DICE's reaction to some of the outrage – including dropping the cost of unlocking a hero by 75 percent – did not adequately address the game's fundamental problems.

The community's concerns were aired widely – a developer's response to a fan's post on Reddit is the most down-voted post in the site's history at over 677,000 downvotes – causing EA to make changes to the game (although it was still flawed), but Star Wars Battlefront II is emblematic of a situation we may be facing more and more: companies' attempts to monetize titles beyond the initial purchase negatively affecting the inherent structure of a game.

Post-launch revenue is a big focus for companies like EA, Activision, Ubisoft, and Take-Two. EA's Ultimate Team sports-game mode generates $800 million a year, Recently, EA CFO Blake Jorgensen clearly stated EA's position at the UBS Global Technology Conference. "For us, trying to move the business to more live services, grow our subscription part of the business, is trying to build a much more steady business."

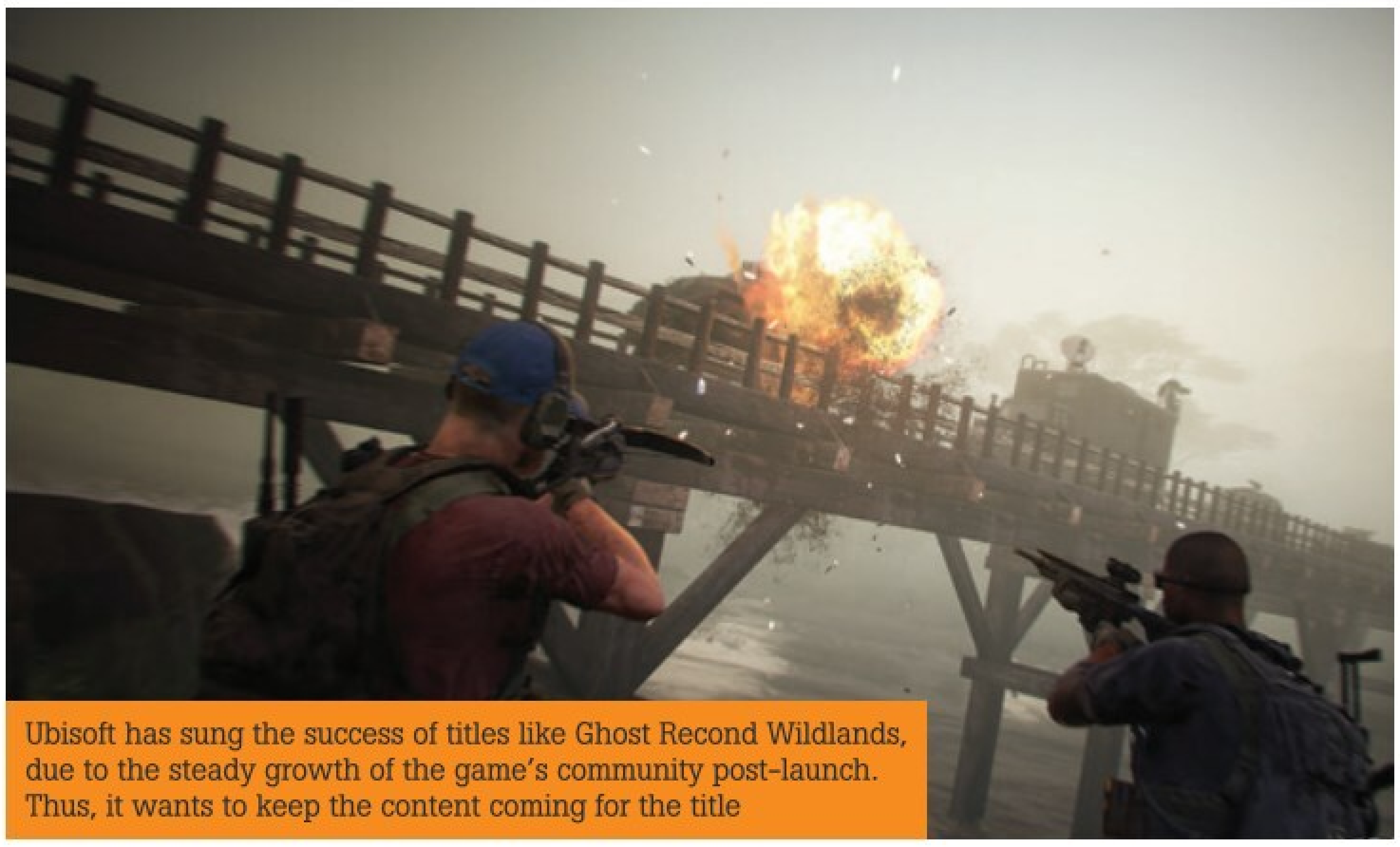
Echoes of this can be seen in EA changing the direction of its single-player Star Wars game into an open-world title players "will want to come back to and enjoy for a long time to come," as EA executive vice president Patrick Söderlund said in an announcement blog



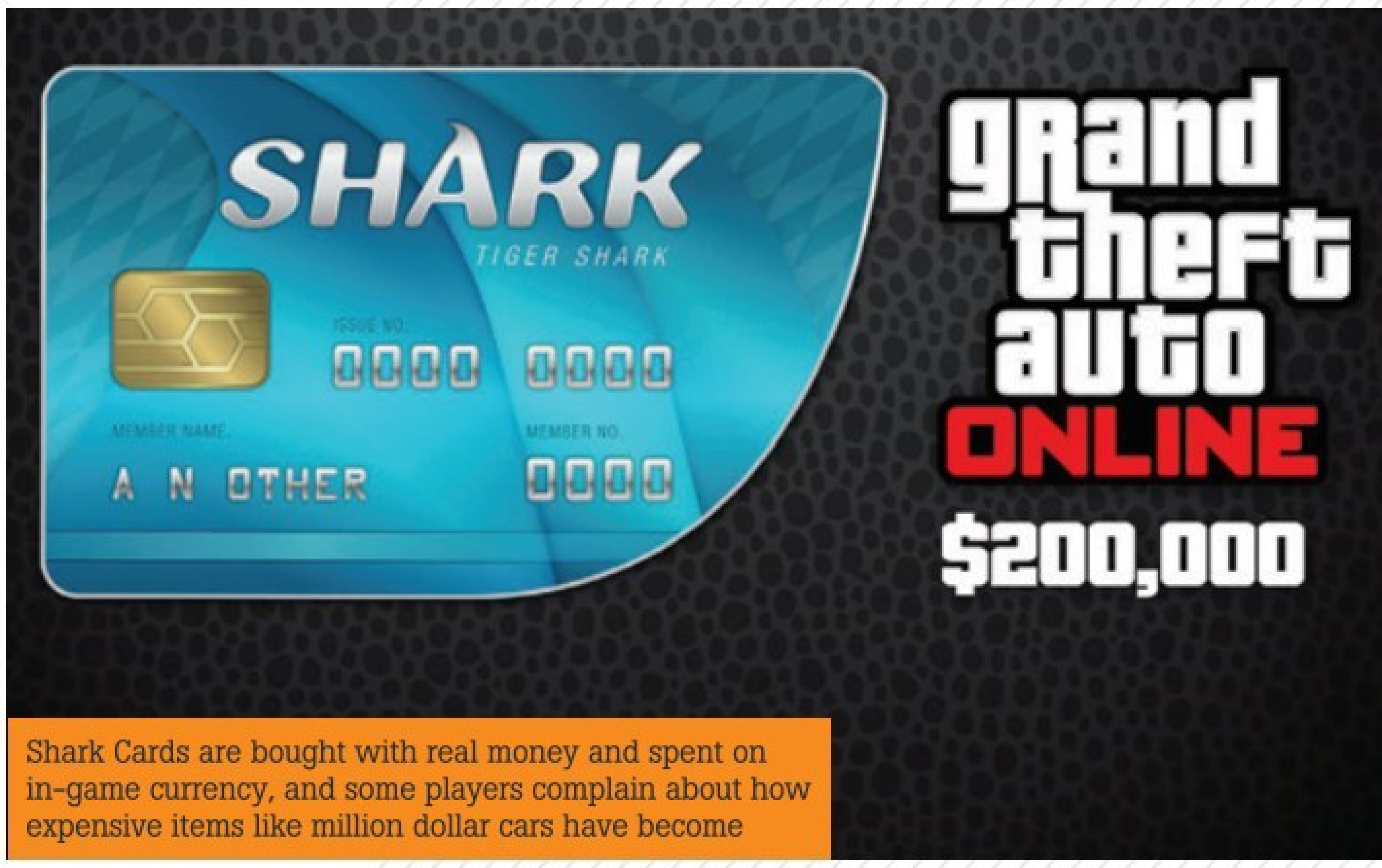
This Star Card for Star Wars Battlefront II conferring up to 20 percent more battle points for matches is very useful, making the monetization to get it all the more conspicuous

You gain Battle Points at an increased rate.

☑ REQUIRES ASSAULT CARD LEVEL 15 (15)
☐ REQUIRES RANK 15 (13)



Ubisoft has sung the success of titles like Ghost Recond Wildlands, due to the steady growth of the game's community post-launch. Thus, it wants to keep the content coming for the title



Shark Cards are bought with real money and spent on in-game currency, and some players complain about how expensive items like million dollar cars have become

post. The change resulted in Visceral Games being shut down and the project moving to EA Vancouver (the studio that handles the FIFA franchise and other sports titles).

Loot boxes and microtransactions are not a problem in and of themselves. Overwatch and many other titles have them without affecting competitive balance or creating an angry community. However, Star Wars Battlefront II is an example that crosses multiple lines. The Star Cards you get in loot boxes aren't just cosmetic; you can pay real money to gain a competitive advantage within the game. The fact that the game steers players toward microtransactions would be normal if it were a free-to-play title, but instead it makes users feel like the $60 they paid for the title isn't enough to experience all the game has to offer. Battlefront II's single-player arcade mode even features a cooldown timer limiting the amount of credits earned per day – a derided staple of even the most pedestrian, free mobile games. Structuring a game with player frustration serving as an incentive to continue via microtransactions is not a compelling carrot, a mistake EA has also recently made with Need for Speed Payback (see page 86).

EA isn't alone in this controversy. Take-Two's NBA 2K18 fell afoul with fans when the game charged as much as 1,500 VC of in-game currency (which can be bought with real cash) for MyPlayer character customization features that were free in NBA 2K17, such as beards and haircuts. Developer Visual Concepts quickly brought down the prices to 100 VC for the items, but the main money problem in the created-player-turned-superstar MyPlayer mode is that gamers can spend real money to pump up their ballers and affect the competitive balance of the MyPark and ProAm modes.

Fans in both cases – and don't forget Diablo III's short-lived real-money auction house – spoke up quickly and loudly, forcing these companies to respond, but perhaps the larger question is how these games got this way during development and why the devs and publishers thought it would fly with their communities in the first place. Even if a title can be updated and patched to amend or remove offending aspects, this may take months or longer if it happens at all, leaving fans with a game they don't like and possibly derailing the deployment of other previously planned content.

Star Wars Battlefront II is an unfortunate case in point: Right before the game's wide release, EA suspended all microtransactions, but the title's trudging progression remained. EA says microtransactions will return at some unspecified date, which is stoking fears that the company is merely trying to garner goodwill and hold onto sales during the crucial launch period – and to make sure the release of *The Last Jedi* on December 13 isn't tainted by the controversy – before turning the microtransactions back on. The game, as it is at the time of this writing, has not been re-tuned to account for the departure of the microtransactions, exposing how embedded they were into the game's fundamental design.

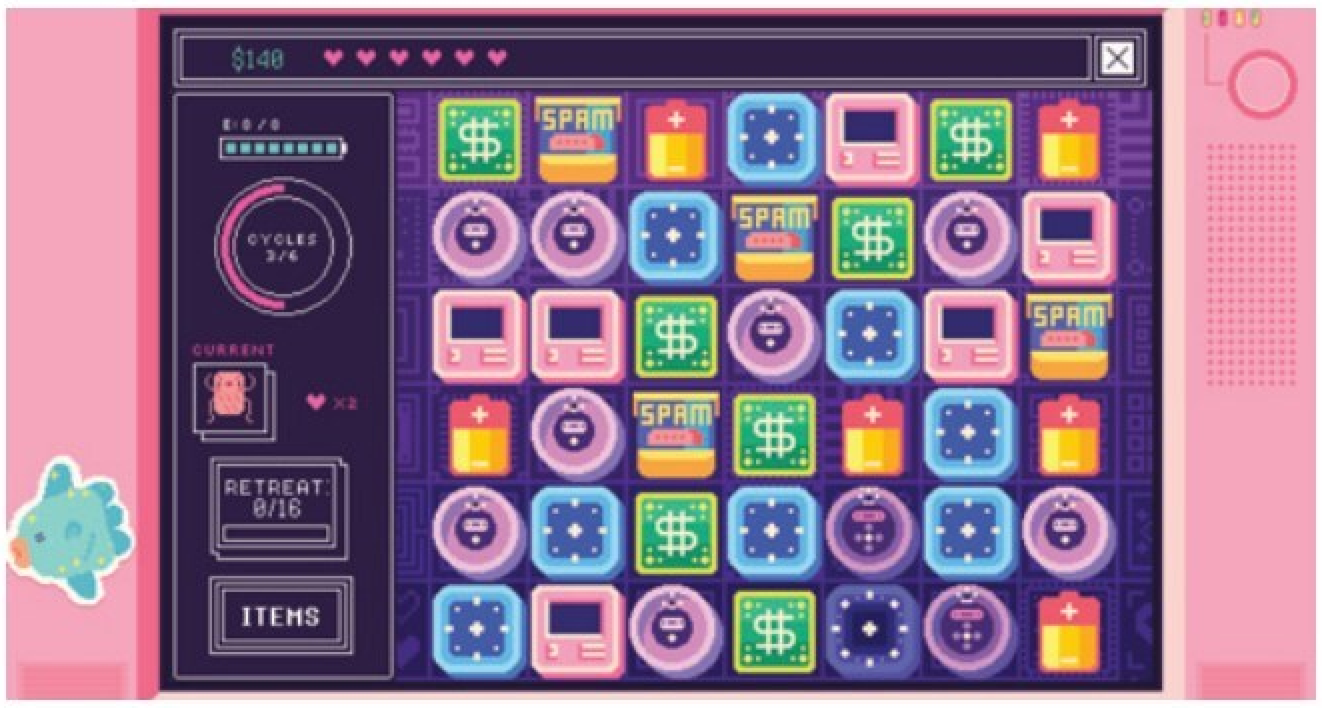
Some fans are currently trying to hold the line by not buying Battlefront II until EA completely and satisfactorily sorts out the game's design and microtransactions, if they purchase it at all, a defiant stance aimed at the one aspect that speaks loudest to the publically held company – sales. Who will prevail?

20 Recent Mobile Games Worth Playing

by Kyle Hilliard

The Switch may be getting all the mobile-gaming attention, but several smartphone games are also worth checking out

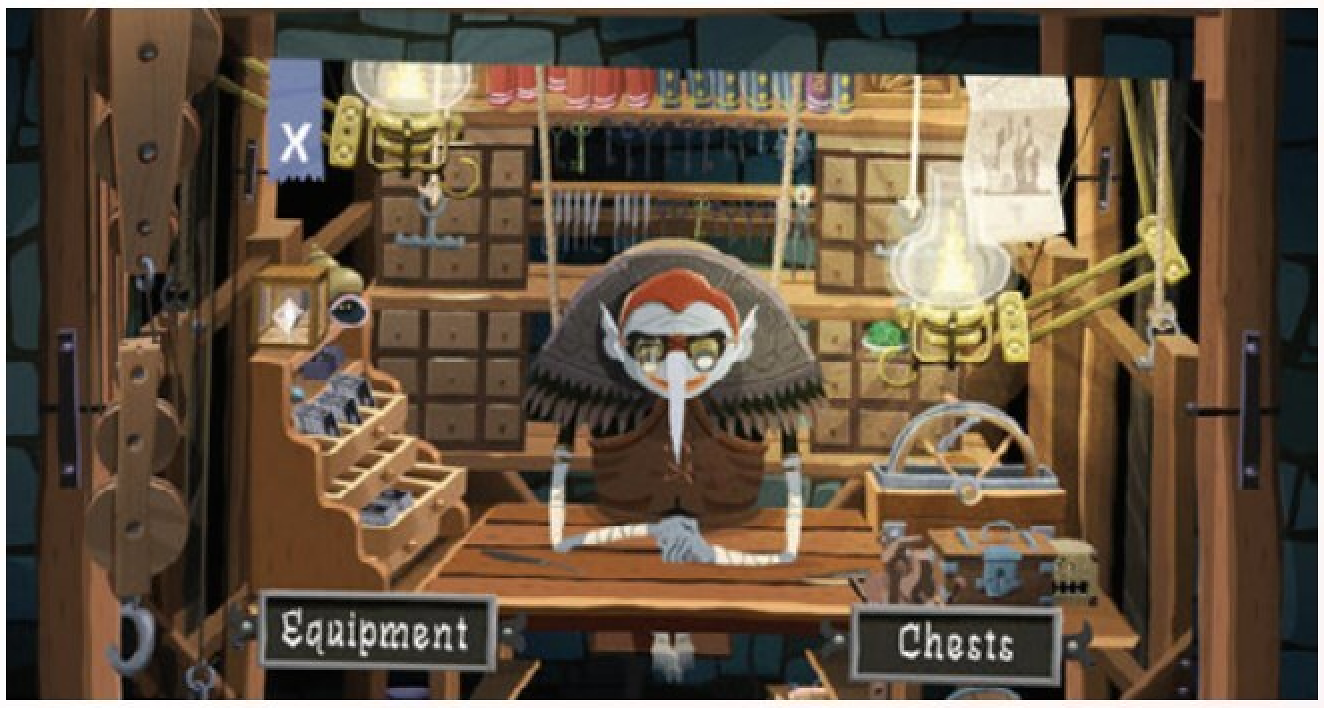
This year has offered phenomenal games for consoles and PC, but the world of mobile gaming has been no slouch. Between engaging newcomers and familiar games that have finally made their way to the portable platform, there are plenty of experiences worth seeking out on that little device you carry in your pocket. Here are our some of our favorites.



BEGLITCHED

Developer: Alec Thomson • Platform: iOS • Price: $3.99

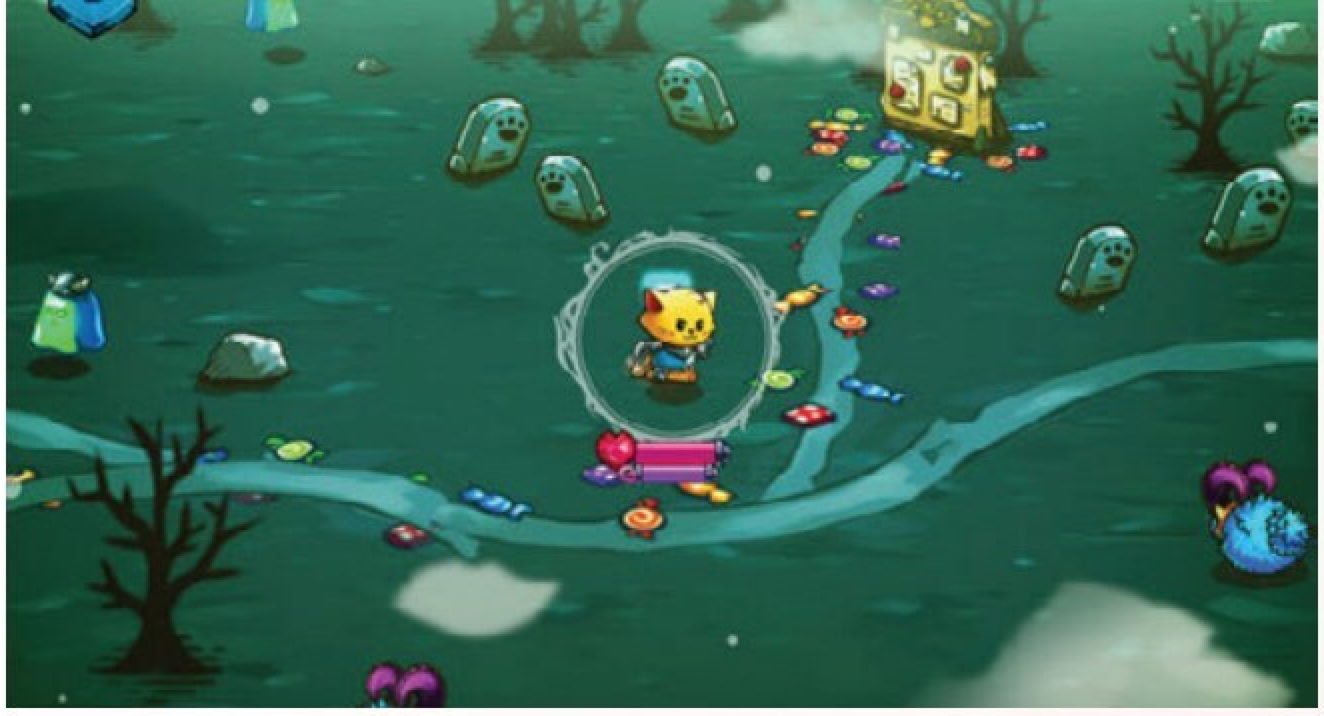
Defying a clear description, Beglitched is a strange game that employs humorous dialogue and storytelling, puzzles, and match-three gameplay to let you creep on a computer that doesn't belong to you. Thematically, it examines ideas of insecurity, but if you're just looking for some fun mobile puzzles to solve, it scratches that itch, too.



CARD THIEF

Developer: Arnold Rauers • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $2.99

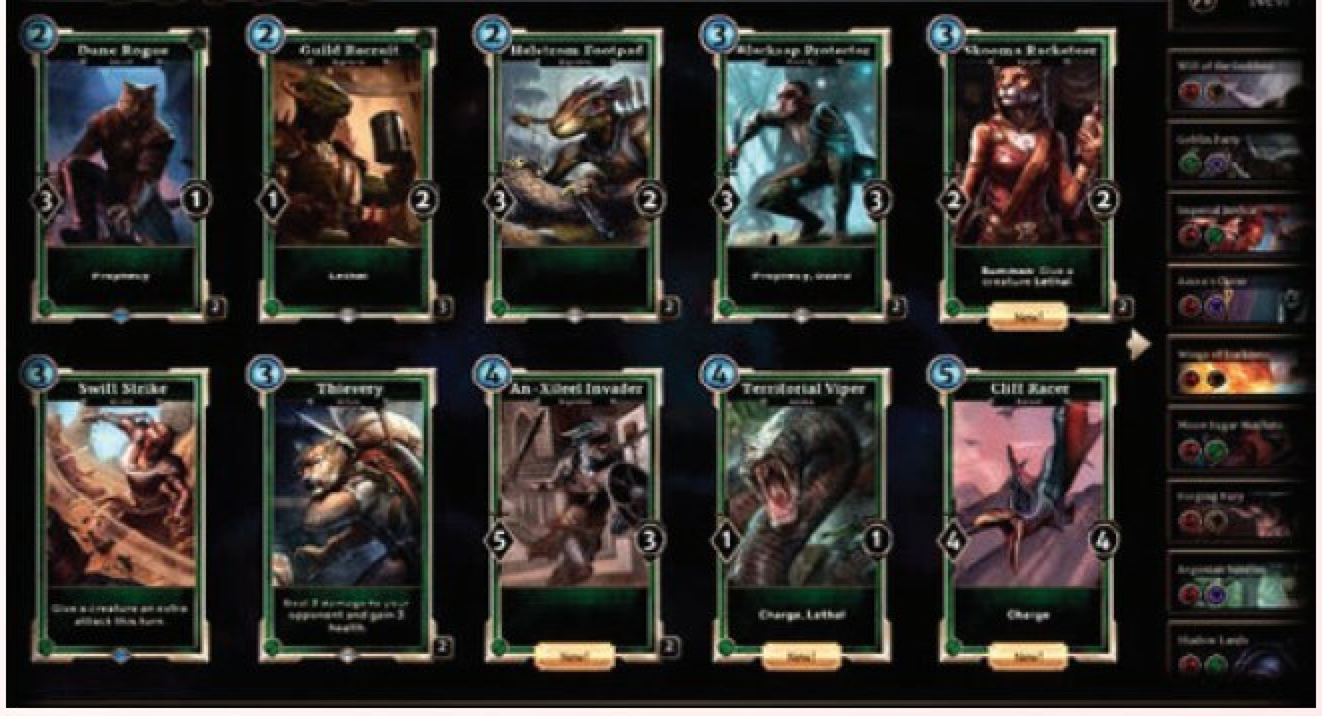
Part stealth game, part card game, Card Thief tells the story of a thief wearing a plague-doctor mask as he sneaks his way through creepy castles to steal treasures and pickpocket guards. The layout of the cards dictates the routes you can take to dodge and rob guards and ultimately make an escape. The strategy and intriguing gothic art style will keep you coming back, even if you're getting caught.



CAT QUEST

Developer: The Gentlebros • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $4.99

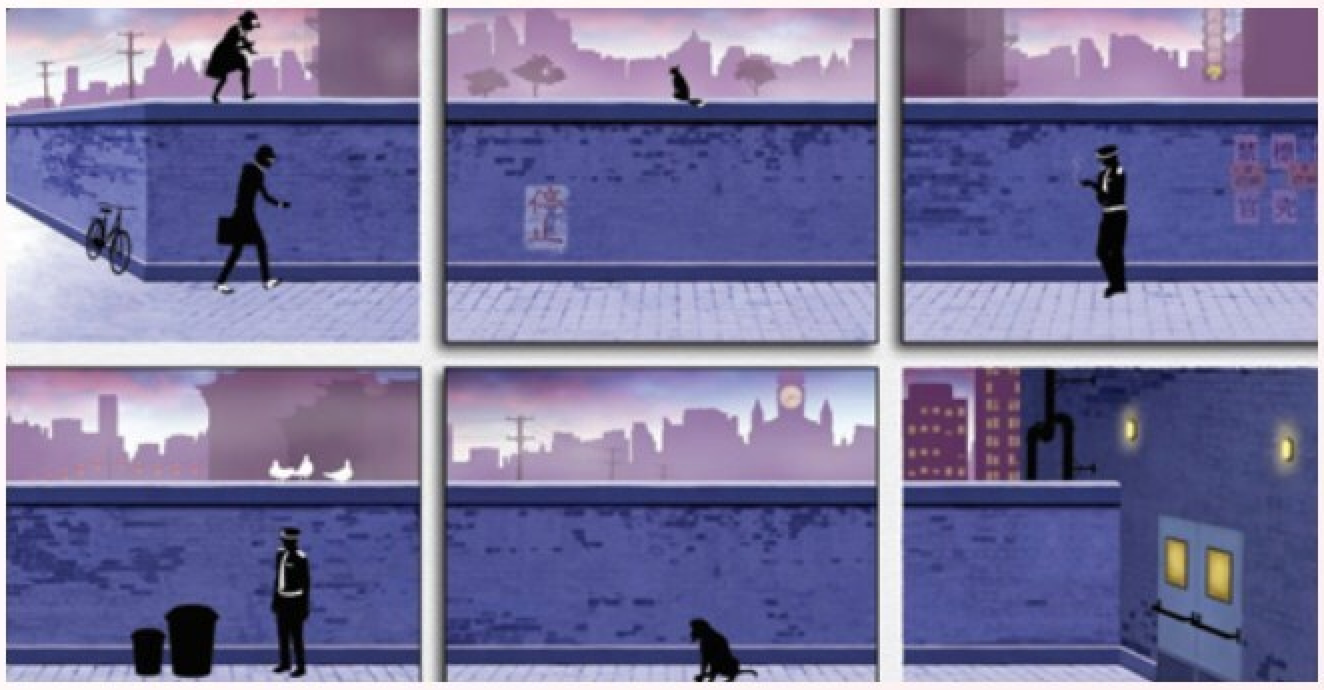
This adorable RPG takes place in a world of cats. Its PC release has already garnered a substantial following, but that doesn't always guarantee a recommendation for the mobile version. Thankfully, here it's earned. Action mechanics that have you dodging and executing attacks translate well to the touchscreen – a difficult trick to pull off for a mobile game.



THE ELDER SCROLLS: LEGENDS

Developer: Bethesda • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: Free

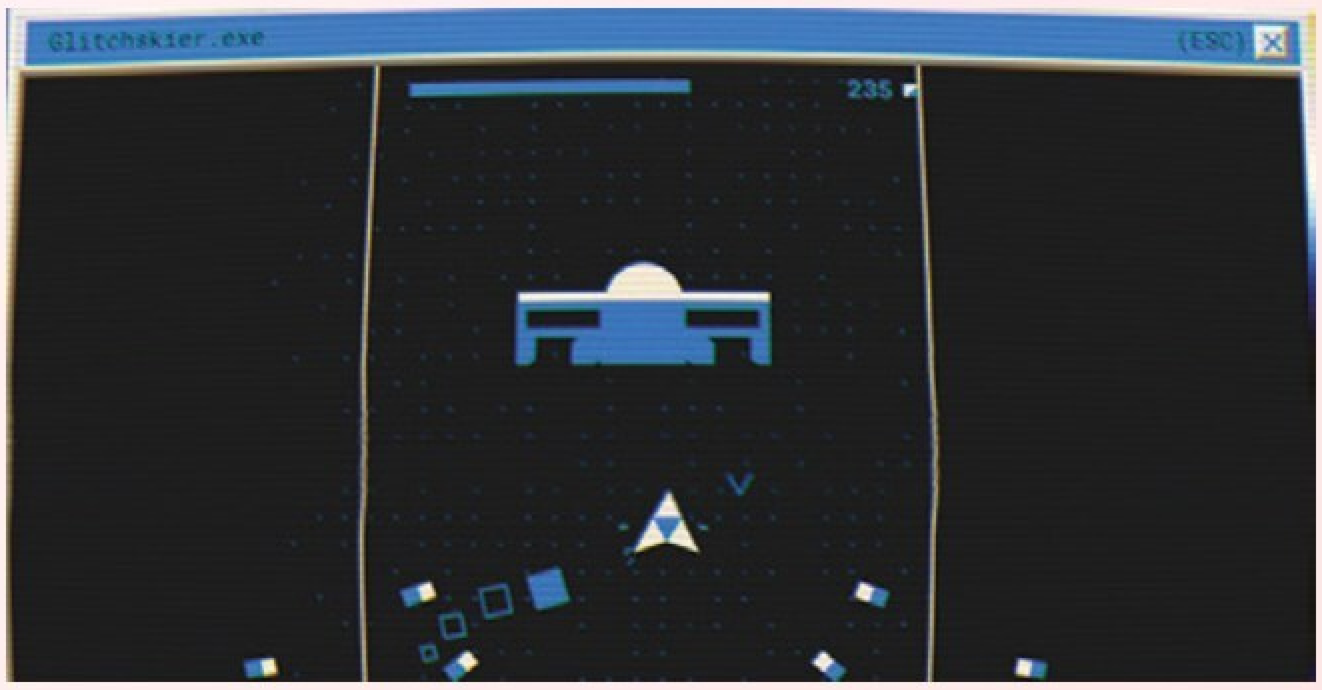
It may not be the Elder Scrolls experience you've become intimately familiar with during your hundreds of hours in games like Oblivion and Skyrim, but Legends does offer insight into those worlds with a multiplayer card game that establishes a distinct identity in the face of competition like Hearthstone and Magic: The Gathering.



FRAMED 2

Developer: Loveshack • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $4.99

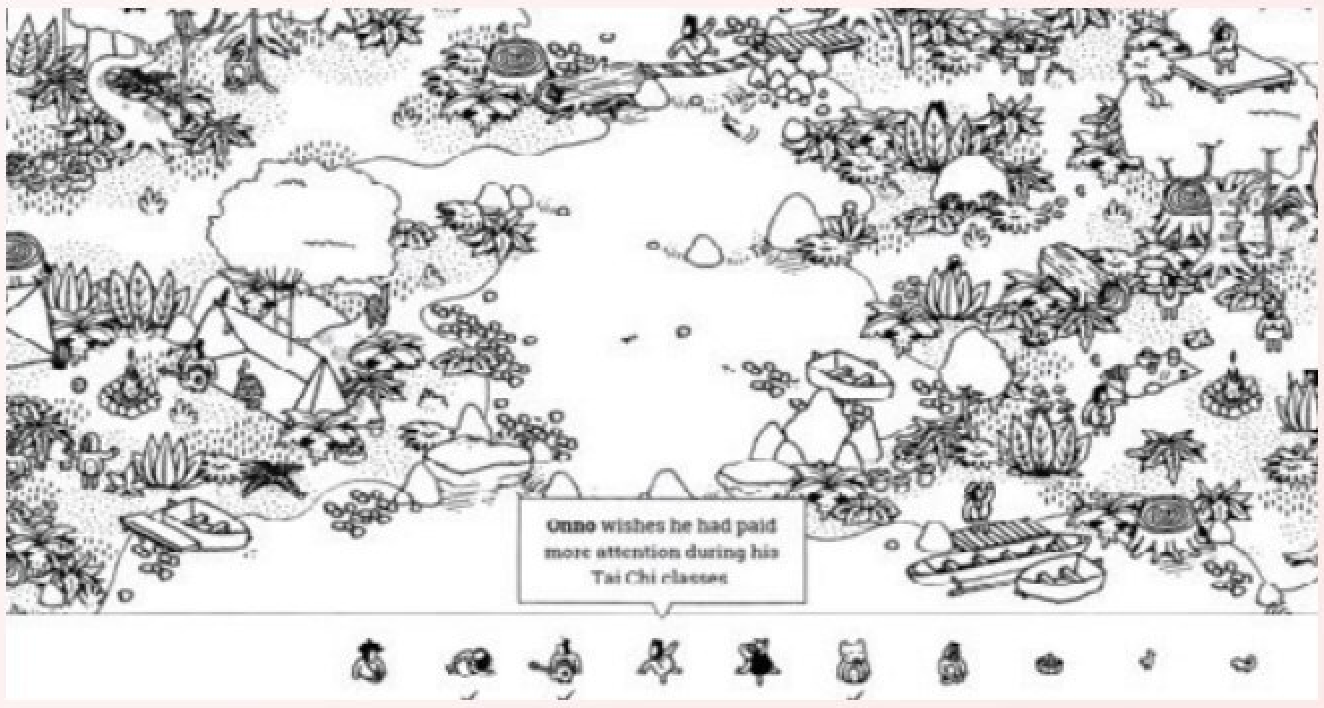
You won't find any spoken dialogue or even text in this story, but you do see a series of comic book-style panels that you can rearrange in order to push the story in the direction of your choosing. The sequel expands on the original game's stylish concept, delivering on the promise of the first entry's potential.



GLITCHSKIER

Developer: Shelley Allen • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $1.99

Glitchskier is a bullet-hell shooter, which is a difficult genre to pull off on mobile. Thankfully, it plays well with the touchscreen and has a fantastic nostalgic style that recalls old CRT computer screens and the archaic operating systems they used to run on. This great high-score chaser is fun to play for a few moments, but also holds up well during extended play sessions.

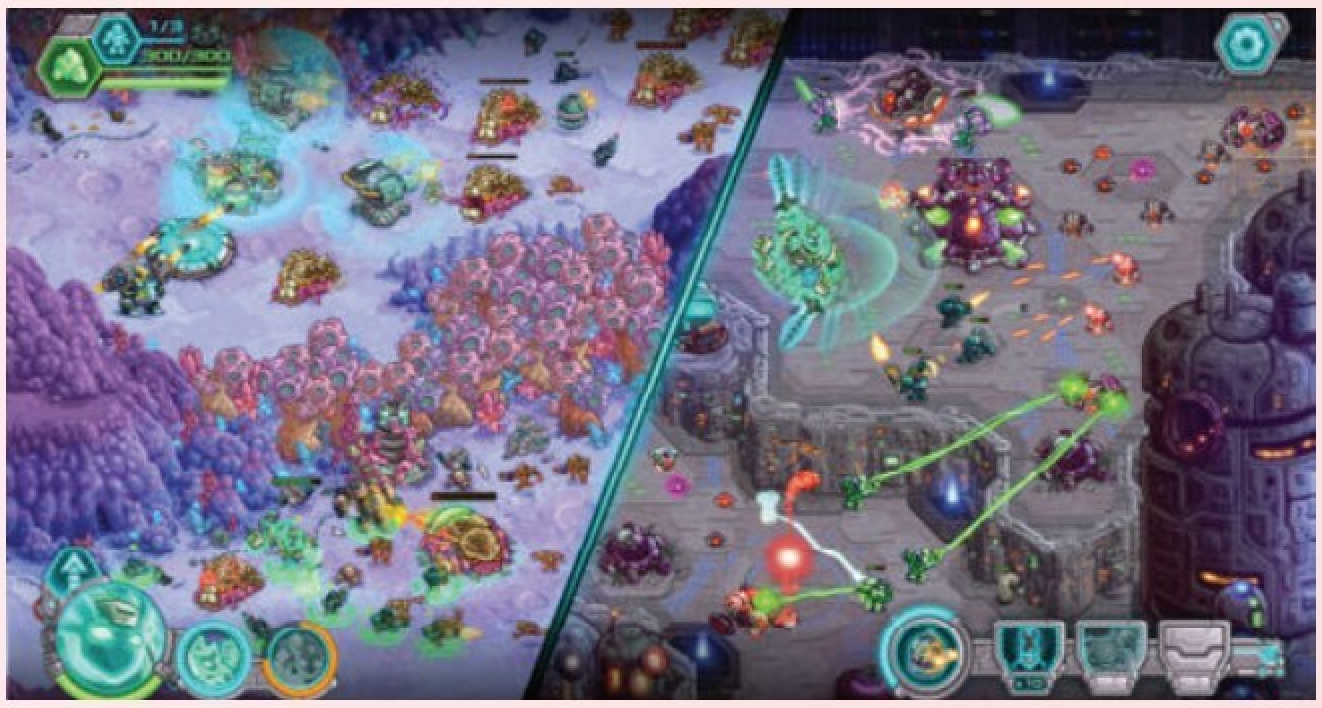


Onno wishes he had paid more attention during his Tai Chi classes

HIDDEN FOLKS

Developer: Adriaan de Jongh • Platform: iOS • Price: $3.99

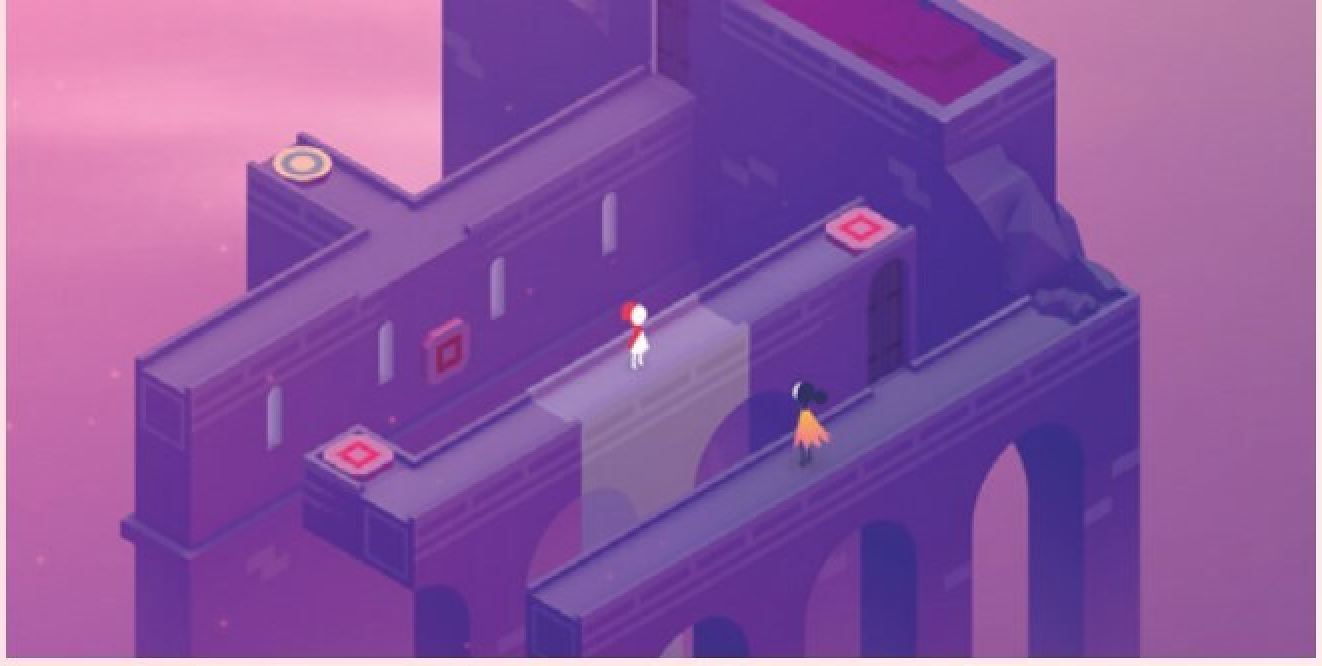
If you're familiar with the classic book series Where's Waldo?, then you know the basic structure of Hidden Folks. What makes it special and separate from the timeless children's book series is a distinct art style and audio sensibility. Seeking assorted items across its strange worlds is engaging, charming, and pleasant.



IRON MARINES

Developer: Ironhide Game Studio • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $4.99

Developer Ironhide made a name for itself with the 2011 mobile hit Kingdom Rush and its sequel. Iron Marines is a successor of sorts to Kingdom Rush, adapting the developer's knack for mobile RTS games into a science-fiction setting. Taking clear inspiration from Blizzard's StarCraft series, Iron Marines tasks you with controlling a small army as it fights an evil alien horde.



MONUMENT VALLEY 2

Developer: Ustwo Games • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $4.99

Monument Valley got a surprise sequel this year, and whether you played the first or not, this follow-up is worth a look. The simple controls work wonderfully on mobile, as the perspective of each puzzle is increasingly skewed in new ways to fool your brain into finding solutions. It will make you feel smart, and pull a bit at your heartstrings as well.

OLD MAN'S JOURNEY

Developer: Broken Rules • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $4.99

The game's title succinctly explains Old Man's Journey's theme. But what makes this point-and-click game worth exploring is its bevy of clever puzzles, fully realized locations, fantastic visuals, and most importantly, the intriguing story about a man who decides to go backpacking across the country late in life.

OXENFREE

Developer: Night School • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $4.99

Sometimes described as a cross between a John Hughes movie and a Wes Craven film, Oxenfree puts you in the shoes of a high-school student going to an under-attended party on an island where supernatural things start happening. The real attraction of the story, however, is the interaction among the party's five attendees and the choices that appear as you "party" together.

PIGEON WINGS

Developer: Ignacio Schiefelbein • Platform: iOS • Price: $1.99

In Pigeon Wings, you are a pigeon in a small plane who must join forces with General Exposition to stop the destruction of East Megalopolis. You do this by flying at incredible speeds, racing other pigeons in planes, and taking on bosses. This game uses motion controls surprisingly well. It's fast and challenging, boasting a great visual style.

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

Developer: Black Isle Studios/Beamdog/Overhaul Games
Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $9.99

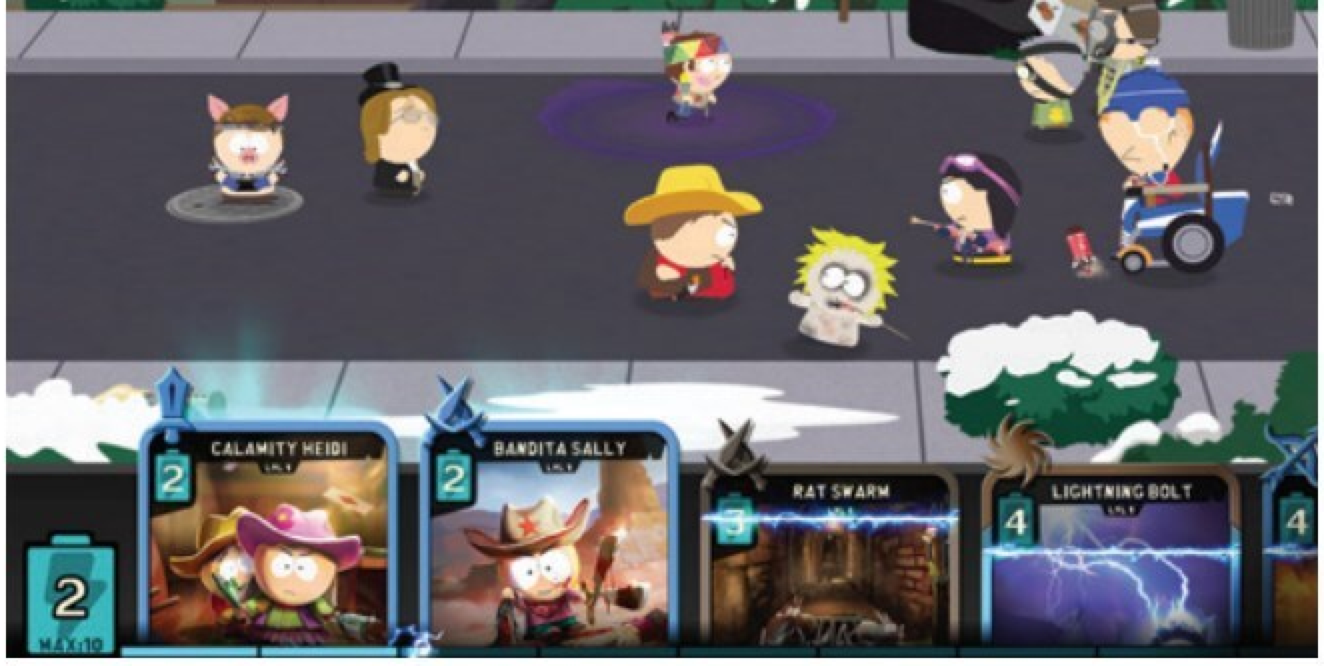
Planescape: Torment is a PC RPG classic from 1999. This year, the game re-released with an Enhanced Edition, which also made its way to mobile platforms. It tells the story of an immortal being who has lived and forgotten multiple lives. The narrative-focused gameplay makes it a perfect fit for touchscreen devices.

KITCHEN
CELL
CELL
CELL
CELL
CELL
CELL
SHOWER
CANTEEN

PRISON ARCHITECT

Developer: Introversion Software/Paradox Interactive
Platform: iOS, Android • Price: Free

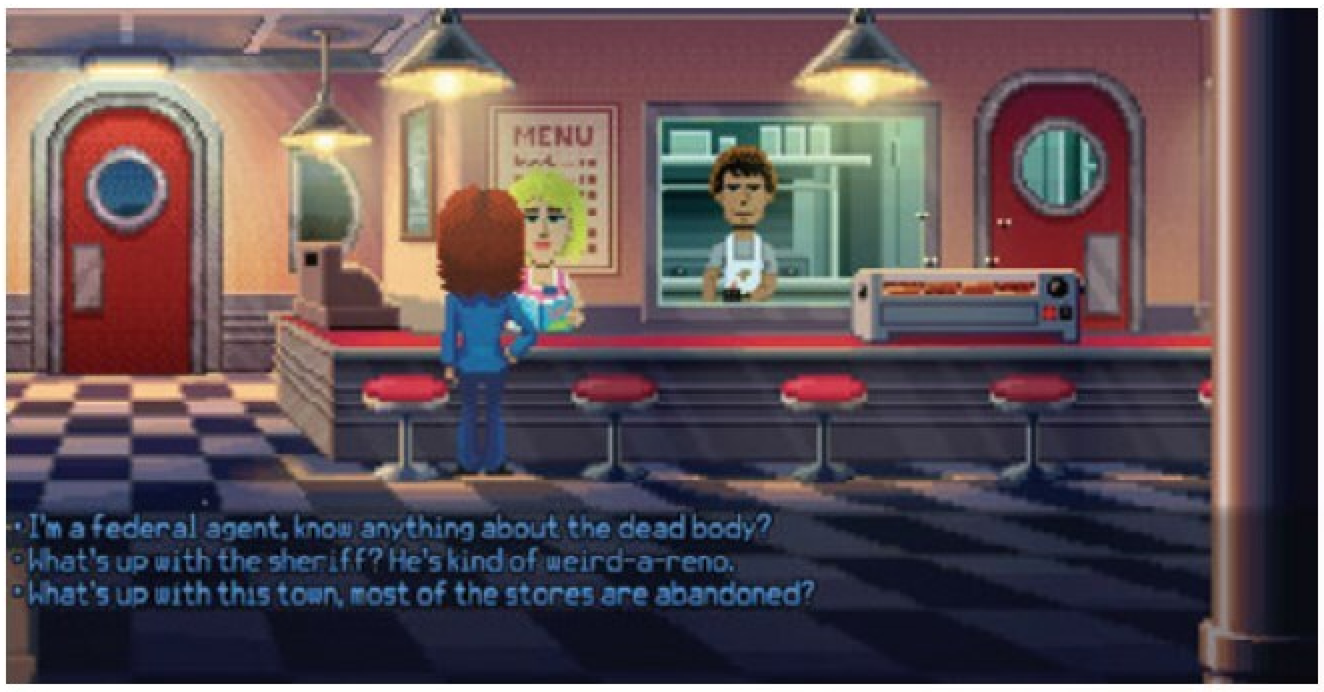
With a few exceptions, simulation games have fallen out of fashion. But that doesn't mean the genre is bad, and Prison Architect is proof of that. You run all aspects of a prison, doing your best to contain a collection of ne'er-do-wells. The mobile port took some time to arrive, but it was worth the wait, especially considering all the depth of the PC version made it over intact.



SOUTH PARK: PHONE DESTROYER

Developer: Ubisoft • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: Free

Phone Destroyer wears its Clash Royale inspiration on its sleeve, so your mileage depends heavily on your appreciation for that still-young genre, but South Park still has a lot going for it. The show's sense of humor and characters are well represented, it features a substantial single-player campaign, and provides more card variety and strategy options the deeper you go.

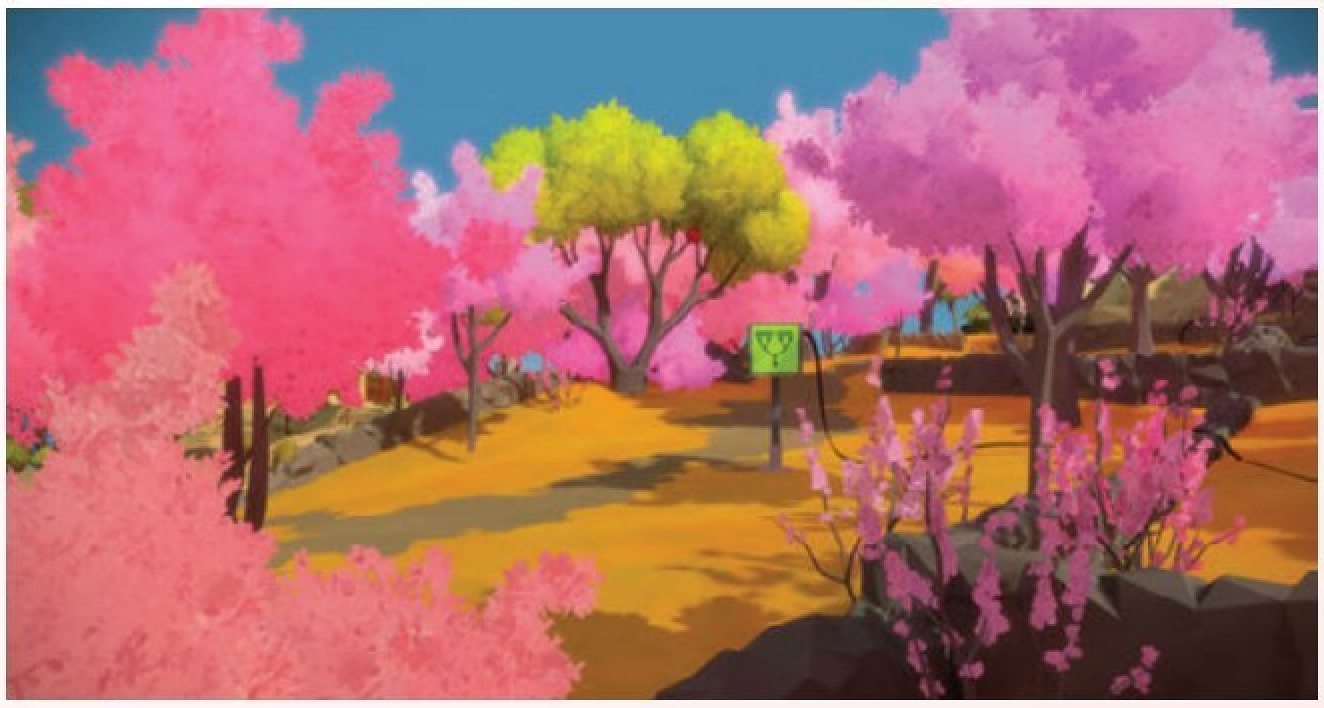


• I'm a federal agent, know anything about the dead body?
• What's up with the sheriff? He's kind of weird-a-reno.
• What's up with this town, most of the stores are abandoned?

THIMBLEWEED PARK

Developer: Terrible Toybox • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $9.99

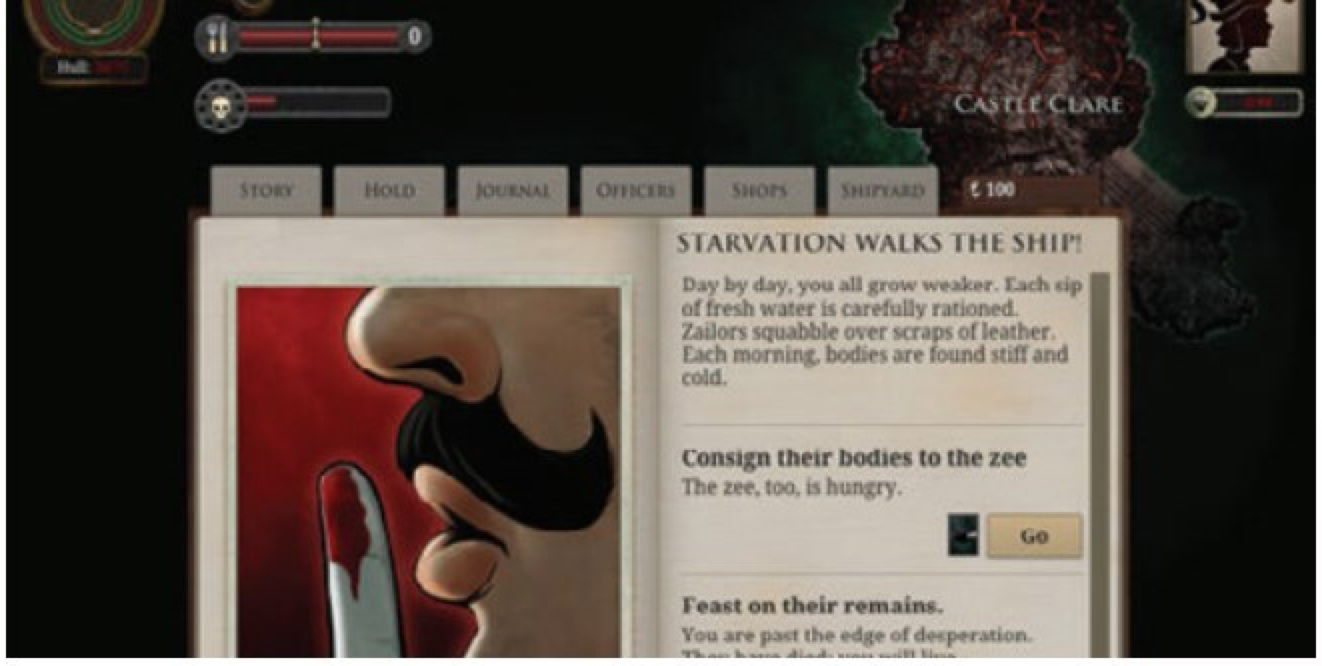
If you want more classic point-and-click adventure games like Maniac Mansion or Escape from Monkey Island, then Thimbleweed Park is for you. Created by Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick, the masterminds that helped create many of those classic adventure games, Thimbleweed Park follows a pair of FBI agents (and others) trying to solve a murder in a small town, all with a nostalgic sense of humor.



THE WITNESS

Developer: Thekla • Platform: iOS • Price: $9.99

The Witness was originally a PlayStation 4 exclusive, but finally came to mobile this year. This is a good thing because its puzzles adapt well to a mobile setting. Played from the first-person perspective, players explore a strange, but beautiful island solving a series of line puzzles, each building and growing on the mechanics of the puzzle prior.



STARVATION WALKS THE SHIP!

Day by day, you all grow weaker. Each sip of fresh water is carefully rationed. Zailors squabble over scraps of leather. Each morning, bodies are found stiff and cold.

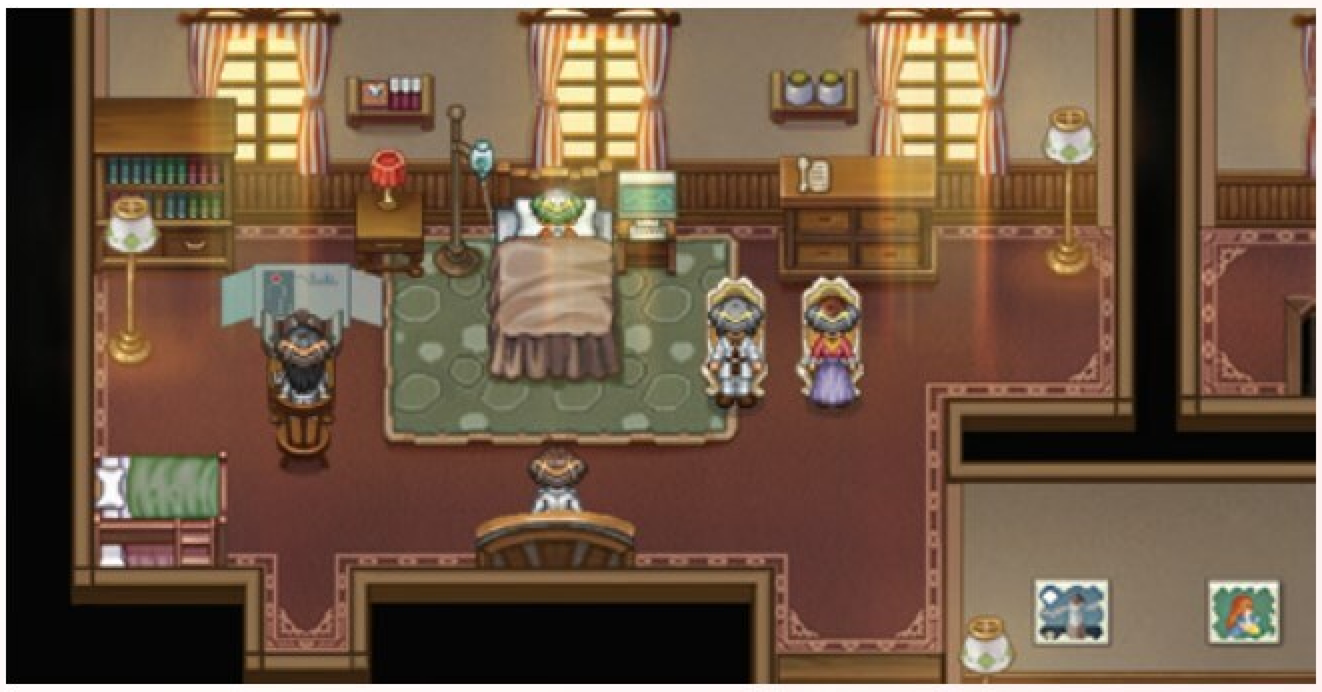
Consign their bodies to the zee
The zee, too, is hungry.

Feast on their remains.
You are past the edge of desperation.

SUNLESS SEA

Developer: Failbetter Games • Platform: iOS • Price: $9.99

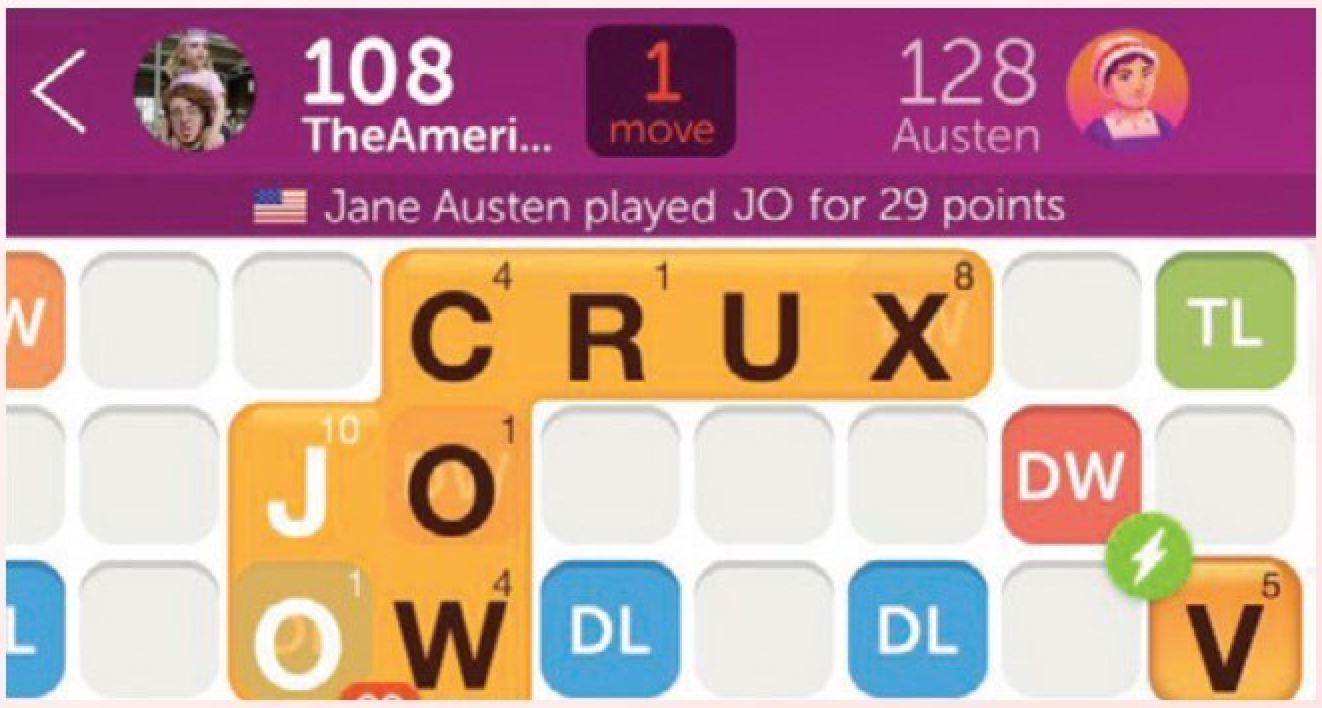
This challenging roguelike drops players into the dark and dangerous world of Fallen London. In your ship, you must explore a perilous ocean of monsters and other dangers, staying alive as long as possible, all while making important decisions that play out in ways similar to a visual novel. You will die often, but unlike comparable roguelikes, some progress carries forward with each new attempt.



TO THE MOON

Developer: Freebird Games/X.D. Network
Platform: iOS, Android • Price: $2.99

To the Moon made an impact when it launched in 2011 on PC, earning praise for its emotional storytelling and beautiful music. The game follows a pair of doctors as they spectate a dying patient's memories, while injecting new ones to fulfil the patient's dream of traveling to the moon. It's a touching experience that took far too long to hit mobile.

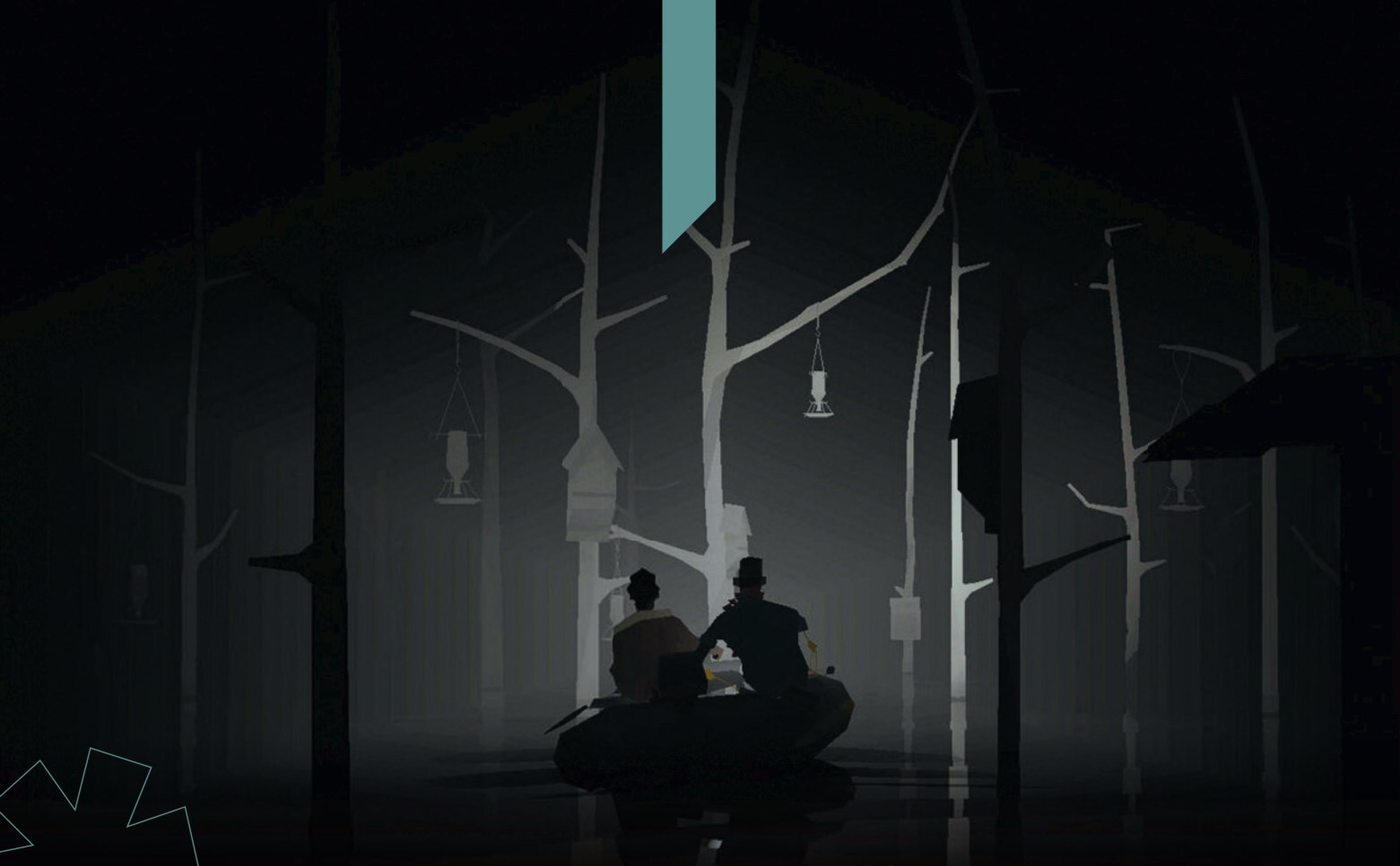


Jane Austen played JO for 29 points

WORDS WITH FRIENDS 2

Developer: Zynga • Platform: iOS, Android • Price: Free

You know Words with Friends. You probably angrily deleted it off your phone in 2012 after your aunt, who doesn't normally play games, destroyed you for the fourth time in a row. The core game hasn't changed for the sequel, but additional modes make it worth another look, like the fast-paced Lightning Round where you and nine other players work together and against each other across multiple boards simultaneously. ◆



THE FIVE-YEAR ROAD TRIP

How the indie art project Kentucky Route Zero took half a decade to reach its final destination

For fans of indie darling Kentucky Route Zero, patience has been an indispensable virtue. Debuting more than five years ago, the first episode met with critical acclaim and found a cult following by using surreal concepts and storytelling techniques to tell a grounded, existentialist tale. Since then, fans have met with sporadic releases from developer Cardboard Computer, ranging from four months to almost two years – unheard of for most episodic games. But for a game as divergent and well-crafted as Kentucky Route Zero, the wait may prove to be worth it. ***by Suriel Vazquez***

When Jake Elliott and Tamas Kemenczy first began working on Kentucky Route Zero, neither of them thought it would take this long. The two had worked together before on a number of high-concept projects outside of games (such as interactive art installations), but eventually decided to create an interactive project using their technical programming skills, recruiting local musician Ben Babbitt to help with the soundtrack.

The project was inspired by the regular trips Elliott and his wife took from Chicago to Kentucky to visit family. “Driving around [In Kentucky], I started feeling out this idea for a game that would be set in Mammoth Cave,” Elliot says. Building on Elliott’s vision, Temenczy looked at Southern Gothic tales, which aim to turn common tropes about the American South on their head, as well as Slow Cinema (a style of filmmaking with long, deliberate views of spaces and minimal storytelling) and magical realism, which mixes elements of the surreal with everyday life.

REDRAWING THE ROADMAP

As Elliott and Kemenczy began adding depth to their characters and building the game around them (see sidebar), the project grew outside of their initial plans. To accommodate, the team decided the best approach would be split the game up into multiple episodes. This would let them release an episode sooner instead of sitting on a project for several years, earn revenue they could use to develop future episodes, and iterate on concepts through feedback from fans.

The plan was to release an episode every four months. Instead, Act II released five months after the first, which proved far too stressful a commitment for the team. “We basically killed ourselves to get it out that way,” Elliott says. While both of these early episodes garnered praise for their avant-garde approach to form, storytelling, and characters, fans and critics also felt they were a little too simple and felt rushed. The team looked at this feedback and decided to take their time with future releases. “Working in a kind of crunch mode is bad for your health, [and] it also constrains your creativity in a lot of ways,” Elliott says.

TAKING THE SCENIC ROUTE

With more room to breathe, Cardboard Computer allowed themselves to iterate on Kentucky Route Zero’s most memorable moments. “The scene where Junebug is singing in the bar in Act III is one of people’s favorite moments, and we had to basically redo that scene like three times.” Elliott says.

Cardboard Computer also decided to further expand Kentucky Route Zero with interlude episodes. The second episode implemented a feature that wouldn’t work on many computer graphics cards that could run the first. Rather than simply release a technical benchmark players could use to see if the new feature would

The Road Not Taken

Early on, Kentucky Route Zero was wildly different from the final product. "It was going to be like Metroid, except instead of fighting, it was talking replacing the guns," says Kentucky Route Zero designer Jake Elliott. "You'd be going through Mammoth Cave in a platformer mode, talking to people and meeting people and then kind of solving light lock-and-key puzzles."

Many of the characters the player would meet on their journey, such as the robot musician Junebug, served mostly as tools to solve puzzles, which the team ultimately decided against. "It was clear that instrumentalizing them and treating them as tools in this way was weird and sort of boring," Elliott says. "So we tried to give each character more depth and deal with them in a less formulaic way and give them space to grow in interesting ways."

work on their computer, the team decided to use this opportunity as a way to further enrich their characters. The result was "Limits and Demonstrations," an interactive art gallery that both tested graphics cards and offered more backstory on the characters of the first two episodes. "It was so much fun to make this spin-off piece that we decided to do them each in between each episode," Elliott says.

Several real-life occurrences also arose. Babbitt moved from Chicago to Los Angeles, Elliott had two kids, and all three members of Cardboard Computer had day jobs to balance with their development schedule. "Depending on what my wife and I are each doing, I've been kind of staying at home or at the office," Elliott says.

Babbitt occasionally had issues keeping up with day-to-day expenses. "I think that if we were really motivated to 'maximize profits' or something, I think we would have approached things differently," Babbitt says. "More than anything we were motivated by a genuine interest in the work and pushing it as far as it could go," Babbitt says.

THE FINAL PIT STOP

As all of these obstacles prolonged development, the team began to feel the pressure of not releasing a final product after several years. "I ended up feeling this sort of nagging sense of like, 'We've got to finish this sometime,'" Babbitt says. "There's this [constant awareness] of how much work there is to do and also knowing by now how much time it takes to do that work."

"I love working on this game, but every art project has like a death drive, you know? It wants to be done." Elliott says.

By this time, Cardboard Computer had been speaking regularly with Nathan Gary, who was helping lead Annapurna Pictures' new interactive label. Cardboard Computer originally planned to begin work on the console versions of the game after the PC version shipped, but after talking with Annapurna, the team decided to collaborate with the nascent publisher for the console version.

With Annapurna's help, Cardboard Computer hired a contractor to help them with testing and quality assurance and translators to help localize Kentucky Route Zero into several different languages, so the team could focus on finishing the final episode without delaying its release. "That schedule's really being driven by the rest of the development work on the game," Elliott says. "The console stuff will just be planned around that."

LOOKING IN THE REARVIEW

Although Kentucky Route Zero will finally see its end early next year, Elliott isn't thinking too far ahead about what Cardboard Computer might do next. "We're trying not to plan it, because we're not sure where exactly we'll be when we finish this project, so we don't know what the next project we'll want to work on will look like," he says.

Despite his background in other mediums, Elliott is confident the videogame form suits the team's aspirations best. "Games have a much larger audience than anything else we've worked in, and that's really powerful, to be able to reach so many people," he says. "There's a lot you can do with video games and still call it 'video games.'"

Elliott also hopes Cardboard Computer's next project is smaller in scope, and that it won't take five years to make. "We'll probably do something smaller, if we're capable of that," Elliott says. Then again, that's exactly how their previous project started. "We might get in there and find out that we can't do that."

THE GRAND EXPERIMENT

Rockstar discusses the past, present, and future of its unstoppable hit Grand Theft Auto Online

by Matt Bertz

What a difference four years can make.

When Rockstar first released Grand Theft Auto Online in October 2013, it was easy to see the potential. Throwing 16 players into the same shared space, the mode had a little something for everyone. At its heart, players could grind through multiplayer shootouts and races to raise cash for new weapons, vehicles, and real estate. But beyond that, players had a wealth of other activities as well. Maybe your friends gathered for a base-jumping excursion, played a round of golf, or cruised the streets starting trouble with other players or robbing liquor stores. Early technical difficulties made getting to many of these activities a chore, but over time Rockstar stabilized the experience.

If a player just returned to GTA Online for the first time in years, they could be forgiven for hardly recognizing it. After dozens of free updates, the game has expanded in multiple directions to accommodate the many different play styles that have emerged in the community. Now, 30 players can roam together in one shared open world. Daredevils have a series of death-defying stunt races to enjoy, made both by Rockstar and the larger community. Those interested in criminal enterprises join a pre-existing organization or start one of their own to run guns, sell contraband, and smuggle illicit goods across Los Santos. Gearheads spend time and money tricking out cars with the deep customization options. Those with cinematic eyes create films with the Rockstar Editor. Players routinely roll through the city in weaponized vehicles, and the wealth of fashion items means you rarely come across two players with the same look.

Rockstar's relentless work paid off. Year in and year out, Grand Theft Auto V continues to appear in NPD sales charts every month. This past May, Take-Two revealed that Grand Theft Auto V cracked the 85 million mark in units shipped, a lofty number only rivaled by games like Minecraft and Tetris. User engagement numbers for GTA Online also keep climbing, making it one of the most successful shared-world experiences of the console generation.

As Grand Theft Auto Online moves into its fifth year of service, I spoke with Rockstar Games director of design Imran Sarwar about the remarkable evolution of the shared world, why the studio shied away from creating single-player expansions for GTA V, and how the release of Red Dead Redemption II will impact the future of the popular mode.

+ Grand Theft Auto Online has proven itself a consistent destination for gamers, with GTA V continuing to stay in the Top 10 sales charts a jaw-dropping four years after its launch. To what do you most contribute its success?

We put that down to a combination of factors. At a fundamental level, there is this amazingly detailed, living open world that works for both a single-player story and a shared multiplayer experience. We put a huge amount of work into the single-player experience, and have subsequently put a huge amount into the multiplayer experience. Both have been both pretty evolutionary and polished. The other real strength of GTA Online is the diversity of the gameplay in the world. You can treat it like a traditional GTA world and explore on your own, or take a friend to the movies or play a game of tennis. Then there is the wide range of relatively structured activities like classic missions or Heists, through to running a business or forming a biker gang, or just attempting a few Freemode challenges. And of course, at any moment you can jump in with friends (or strangers) and invent something of your own – creating your own metagames using props inside the world, teaming up to do a series of convenience store robberies or just stopping traffic to create carnage. We love checking out the latest crazy videos when people discover some new way to play in the world.

+ With both GTA IV and Red Dead Redemption, Rockstar made excellent, dedicated single-player campaign-style expansions in Episodes from Liberty City and Undead Nightmare. Grand Theft Auto Online has integrated narrative elements to setting up criminal enterprises, but most of the tales generated from GTAO are more emergent in nature. Was it a tough call to move away from more scripted experiences or do you view this as a natural evolution of open-world design toward giving players more agency over their play experience?

No, it was not really a conscious decision, it's just what happened. We would love to do more single-player add-ons for games in the future. As a company we love single-player more than anything, and believe in it absolutely – for storytelling and a sense of immersion in a world, multiplayer games don't rival single-player games. With GTA V, the single-player game was absolutely massive and very, very complete. It was three games in one. The next-gen versions took a year of everyone's time to get right, then the online component had a lot of potential, but to come close to realizing that potential also sucked up a lot of resources. And then there are other games – in particular Red Dead Redemption II. The combination of these three factors means for this game, we did not feel single-player expansions were either possible or necessary, but we may well do them for future projects. At Rockstar, we will always have bandwidth issues because we are perfectionists and to make huge complex games takes a lot of time and resources. Not everything is always possible, but we still love single-player open-world games more than anything. I don't think you could make a game like GTA V if you did not like single-player games and trying to expand their possibilities!

+ Rockstar made the conscious decision to not charge players for large content drops like Gunrunning, Import/Export, Further Adventures in Finance and Felony, etc. Yet we still see criticisms that too much of the new content in GTA Online is aimed toward high rollers who either spend hundreds of hours in the game or invest in Shark Cards. What is your response to those complaints?

Every single evolution ever made in the GTA franchise has been treated, at the time, with derision and criticism by sections of the fanbase, including moving the game to 3D, having a talking protagonist, having an African-American protagonist, making the Episodes, and having three playable characters. GTA Online is no different. GTA has stayed relevant because we are obsessed by continuing to evolve and iterate, but whenever we do that, people don't like it – so all we can do is make what we believe are great experiences.

With GTA Online, we decided to give our players access to all updates for free, because it kept our players together and allows to make their own choices about what they want from each update and in what order. Everyone has access to everything and no one is forced to pay a lump sum for items they may

not want or need. With both GTA IV and Red Dead Redemption, we sold DLC and unfortunately both times, it fractured the audience and helped to kill the games much faster than they deserved. With GTA Online, if there's content people don't like or want, they can simply ignore it and do something else, while still being in the same core world as everyone else. For us, this model works and has let us keep expanding the experience. Given the huge amount of stuff we have given absolutely for free, including Heists and all the modes, and all the clothes which cost almost nothing, I really don't think we can be accused of gouging the player base – people can happily play and never spend a dollar, aside from buying the game.

In addition to those regular large updates, we are always offering additional bonuses and discounts for players, which not only exposes them to fun new items and modes they may not have considered owning or playing, but it means that simply by jumping into the game in the weeks prior to an update, you can quickly earn enough cash to buy the items you want when a new update arrives. The vast bulk of our millions of players are playing their way to the items they need. Forcing people to buy regular updates the size of something like Heists or Gunrunning would almost certainly elicit similar pushback to the criticism we receive for the way GTA Online works, and would definitely not have given us the ability to deliver content at this level of quality to millions of players in the same way.

+ **How much longer do you plan to add new expansions and updates to GTA Online? Will this live on in tandem with Red Dead Redemption II when it launches next year?**
We don't yet have a fixed end point in mind, but the rollout of updates may change a little in order to encourage players to try Red Dead Redemption II when it launches. It would be great to have players splitting time between two incredible worlds, but we shall see how things evolve. One of the enjoyable things about working on a project like this is that you can iterate quickly, and change and evolve plans fairly quickly too, so we don't have to be as clear in our plans as with other projects. ◆

image credits: bougazn, Candy_Spice, ChaosZake, EVOLUT7ON, gtafiveonline, incredible91852, kriskirby1986, ROSCOE, Sariska, Th3Cosmic

Indie Sports Games Find A Niche In Pick-Up-And-Play

The sports genre is dominated by familiar names like Madden and FIFA that re-enter the gamer consciousness on an annual basis. But smaller studios continue to pepper the mix with new projects that are attempting to innovate within the field.

by Matt Miller

Lonely Mountains: Downhill is one of those unerringly simple and yet immediately engrossing games in which the fun is apparent after just a few seconds of gameplay. The brief demo I played couldn't be any more straightforward, but tight controls and an innovative concept sell the gameplay. You control a mountain biker as he navigates the switchbacks, sudden drops, rocky outcroppings, and old bridges that make up the many paths down the mountain. With an isometric view that recalls classics like Marble Madness, you pedal, brake, and sprint through narrow defiles and dangerous ramps.

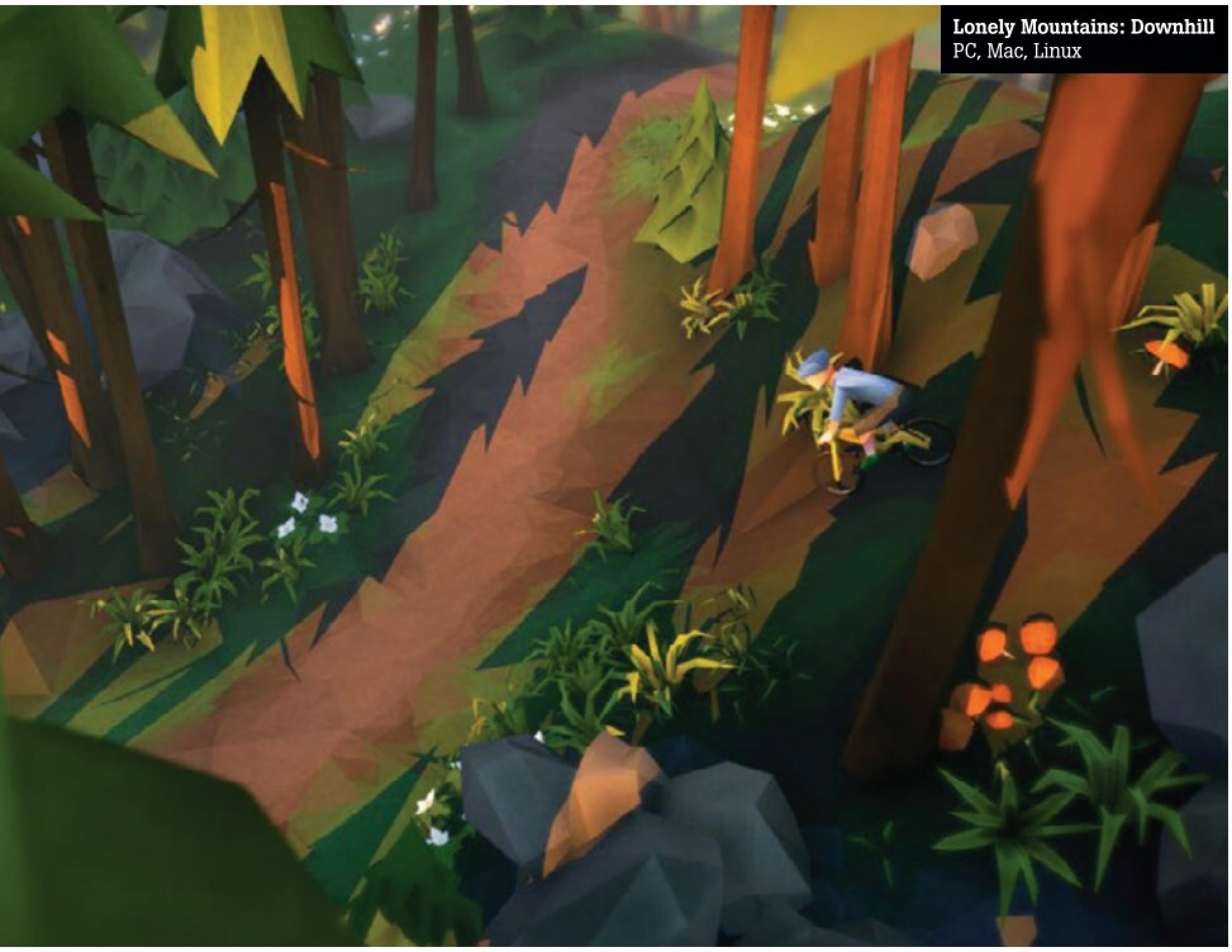
The developers at Megagon Industries clearly invested a great deal of time in the feel of the bike, and it shows. The control is spot on. The branching paths of the mountain descents offer constant obstacles and new ways to get tripped up, but the constant restarts after a crash aren't a chore, since you're constantly learning new shortcuts, jumps, and route options.

The attractive polygonal art style is a perfect presentation for the precise gameplay. The environments have plenty of color and dynamic shapes, but nothing clutters the screen to distract you from your focus. That focus is accentuated by an ambient wilderness audioscape of bird calls and gentle wind that make for an idyllic ride, even as you crash headlong into boulders. Megagon hopes to release Lonely Mountains in the middle of 2018 on PC, Mac, and Linux.

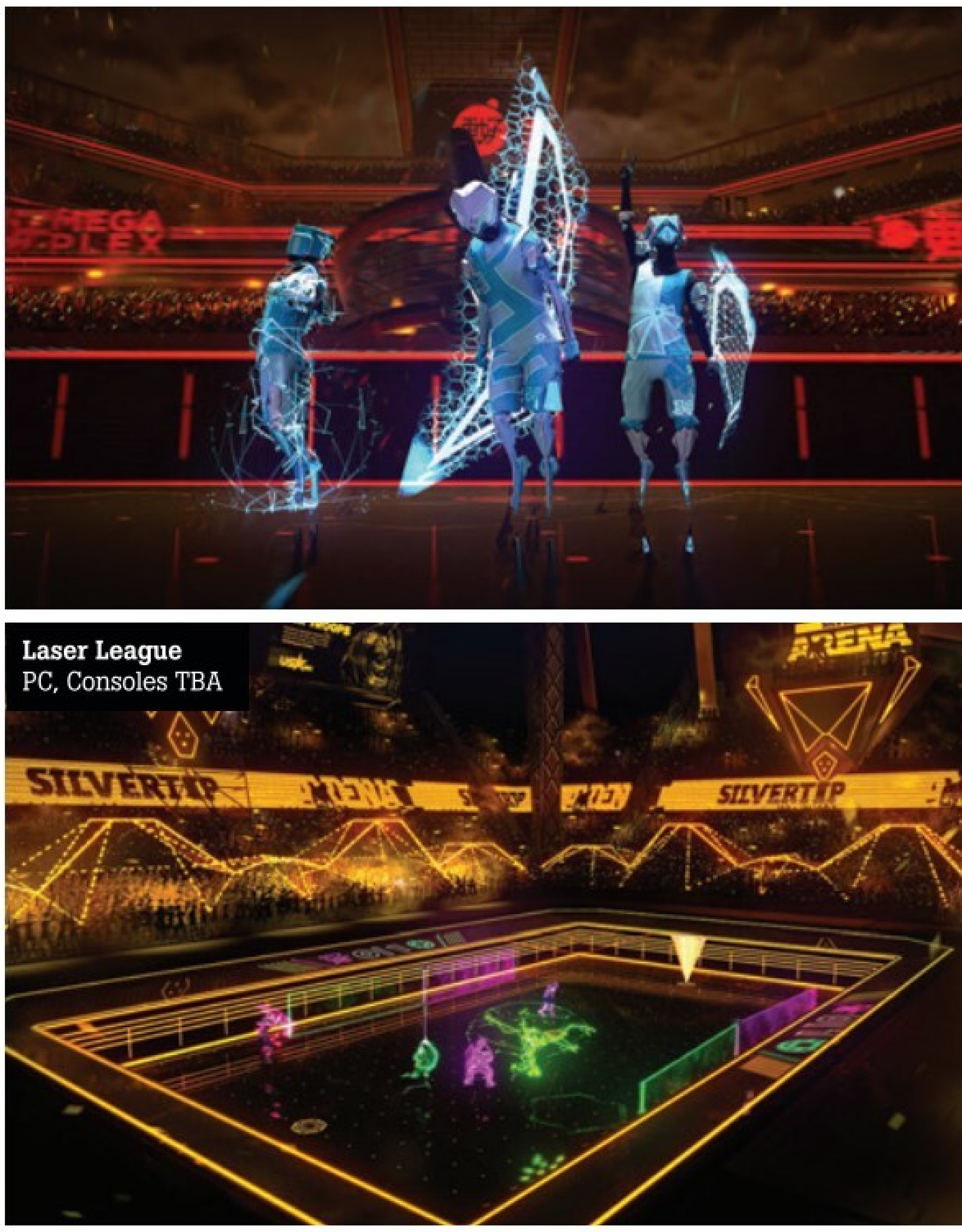
We named Roll7's **Laser League** as one of the hottest games coming out of E3 2017, and the intriguing futuristic sports game continues to impress. The basics are easy to grasp. The big sport of 2150 involves frenetic arena combat in which teams of three dodge, attack, and try to survive amid constantly shifting laser grids while taking control of nodes around the pitch. The feel of this original multiplayer sport is immediately understandable and fun, as you pick up a controller and confront a round of play with friends.

Roll7 has a proven track record of supplying accessible gameplay that deepens over time, and while Laser League is a far cry from the team's work on titles like OlliOlli and Not A Hero, it maintains that focus on gradual mastery of very clearly structured systems. While the basics of a match can be played by a beginner, it's the interplay between the many classes that communicates depth. In the final game, the 4v4 online and offline matches are set to have tremendous customization and options, including multiple stadiums and maps, at least half-a-dozen unique classes, and hundreds of ways to customize your personal character.

It doesn't take long after diving into a few matches to recognize the game's potential for high-level competitive play, even as it simultaneously appeals as an ideal party game with friends. This is one to keep a close eye on; I predict the social dynamic, futuristic visuals, and finely honed gameplay may make this a surprise hit at launch. Laser League is targeting an official release on PC in early 2018, with potential console versions at a later date, but the team is actively field-testing beta versions now if you're looking for a taste of the action. ◆



Lonely Mountains: Downhill
PC, Mac, Linux



Laser League
PC, Consoles TBA

by Matt Miller

From Screen To Table

The video game-inspired board games you should play

HUNTER BLUNDERBUSS
MOLOTOV COCKTAIL
Bloodborne THE CARD GAME
Fluorescent Flower
Executioner
TRANSFORM
SAW CLEAVER
Ranged Weapon
Melee Weapon

Bloodborne THE CARD GAME

1 Bloodborne: The Card Game

Just like in the video game, expect to do a lot of dying in Eric M. Lang's clever tabletop incarnation of this Lovecraftian/Victorian mash-up. Three to five players fling themselves into a Chalice Dungeon beneath Yharnam, battling terrifying foes and bosses, building a better inventory, and pushing their luck to become the greatest hunter. Constant risk/reward and an intriguing mix of cooperation and competitittion (read: betrayal) make this a worthy tabletop incarnation of FromSoftware's dangerous game world.

$34.99 | cmon.com

2 Fallout

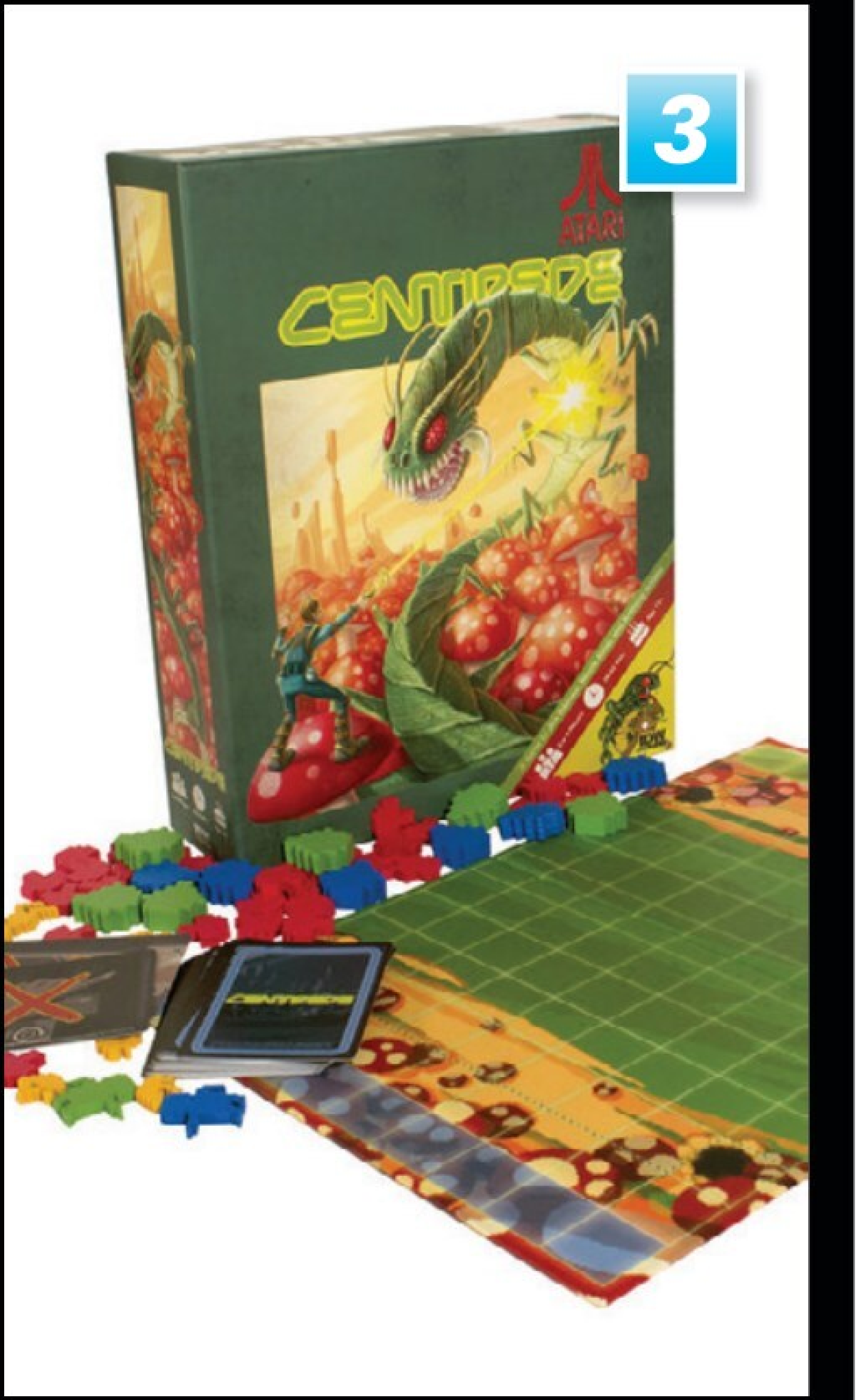
This narrative-focused adventure game for one to four players casts each player as a canny survivor in the post-nuclear detritus of humanity's folly. Battle robots and super mutants, level up your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. character, and make tough decisions that reshape the rest of the game session. Using an innovative card-deck mechanic, the events and encounters adapt on the fly to the choices each player makes, even as you explore landscapes inspired by the main locales of Fallout 3, 4, and their expansions.

$59.95 | fantasyflightgames.com

3 Centipede

Looking for a nod to the classics? This refreshingly straightforward two-to-four player game pits the gnome against the centipede on a board that perfectly captures the pixelated glory of the original arcade game, even including blocky monochromatic game pieces. Don't let the accessible rules and 30-minute playtime fool you; like the original, this board-game incarnation is deeper and more challenging that it appears at first glance.

$39.95 | idwgames.com



4 Civilization: A New Dawn

Sid Meier's engrossing empire builder has a fantastic new tabletop iteration. Players customize their path to greatness, controlling a leader with unique powers as each pursues cultural, industrial, military, scientific, and economic goals. The customizable map, brisk pace of play, and pitch-perfect emulation of the video game make this an ideal strategy deep dive for two to four players.

$49.95 | fantasyflightgames.com

4
Civilization
A New Dawn

Genesys
Star Trek Adventures
Xanathar's Guide to Everything

GENESYS CORE RULEBOOK

The stellar narrative-dice mechanics of this new tabletop RPG gives tremendous power to players to shape the story, while the book itself is oriented to allowing play in any setting or genre you might like, including high fantasy, sci-fi, steampunk, horror or anything else you can imagine.

$39.95
fantasyflightgames.com

STAR TREK ADVENTURES

Gorgeous art and in-universe design and layout make this RPG book a treat for Star Trek enthusiasts, but it's the presence of a deep and complex RPG ruleset in the long-running sci-fi franchise that is the real triumph. It perfectly captures the setting for those who long to go where no one has before with their friends.

$59.99
modiphius.net

XANATHAR'S GUIDE TO EVERYTHING

Dungeons & Dragons' 5th edition sees its first major rules expansion with new subclasses, spells, narrative aids, and tools for dungeon masters to shape a customized campaign filled with adventure and new surprises.

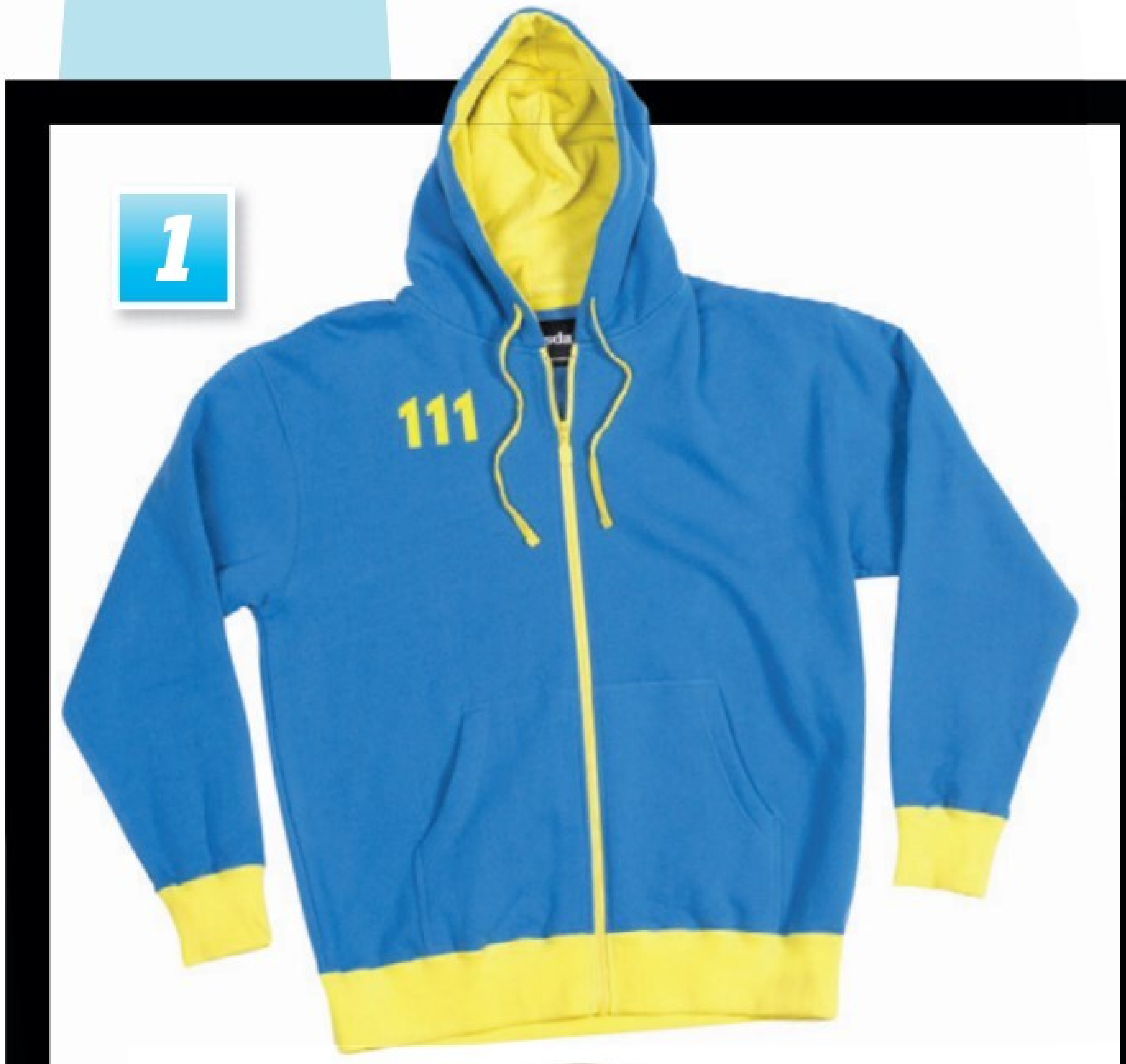
$49.95
dnd.wizards.com

Taking On Winter

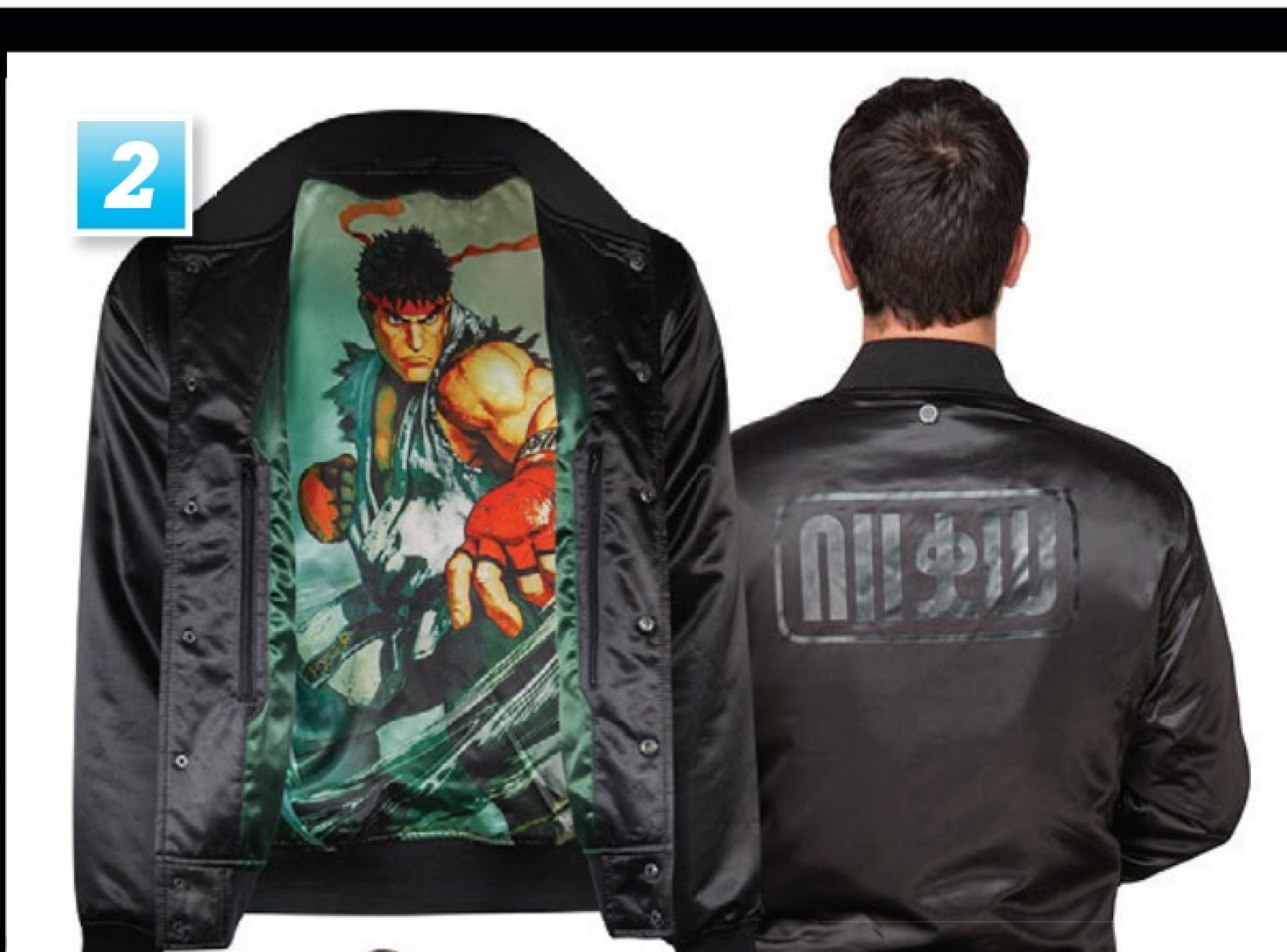
Geeky fashion to keep you stylish and warm

Winter is upon us, and with it comes the need for some warm additions to the wardrobe. Why not let your inner nerd shine through as you trudge through snow and attend holiday parties with some stylish and nifty video game-inspired winter wear? Here are some of our favorite jackets, hoodies, and sweaters that draw inspiration from the world of games. ***by Javy Gwaltney***

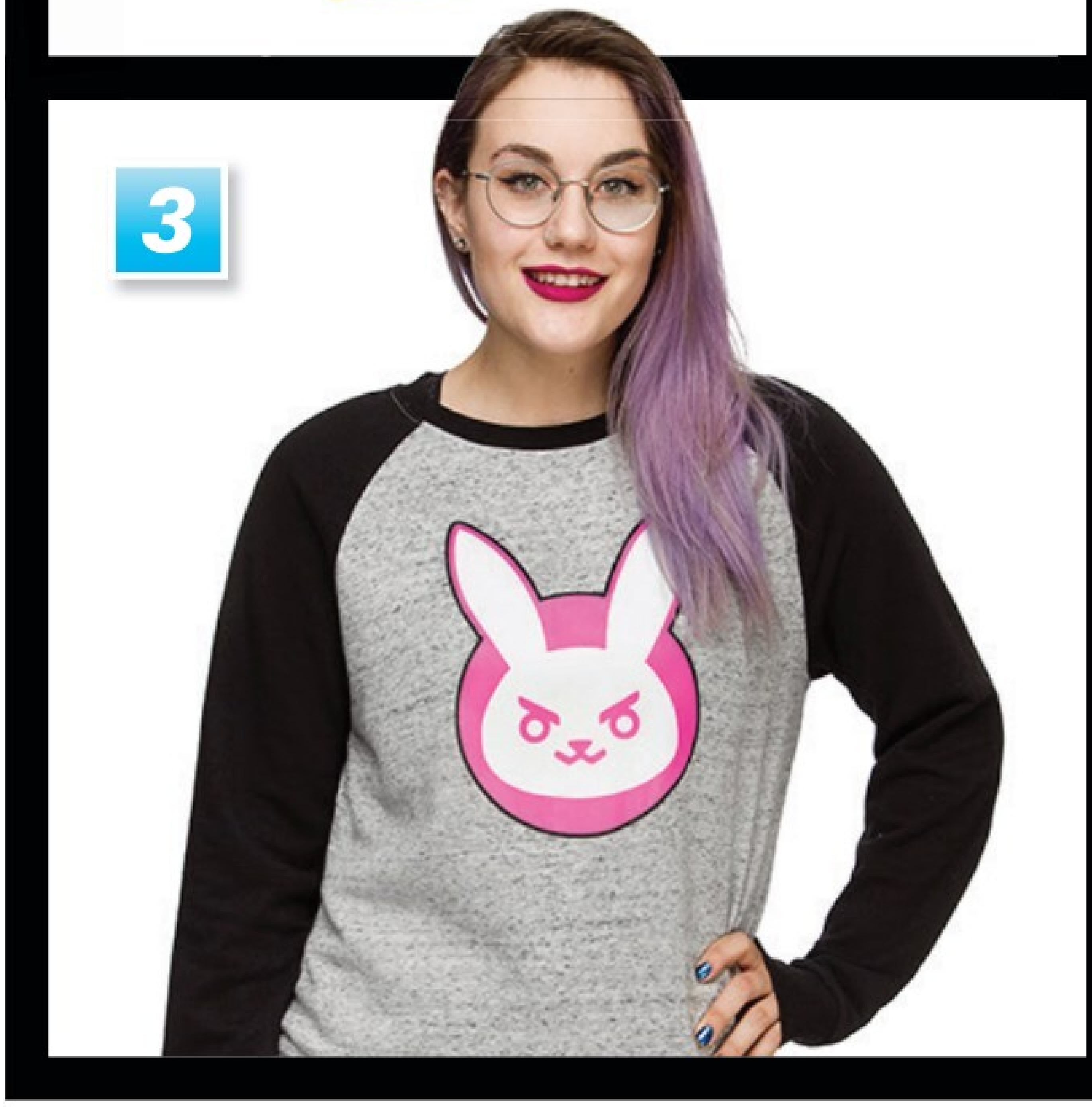
1



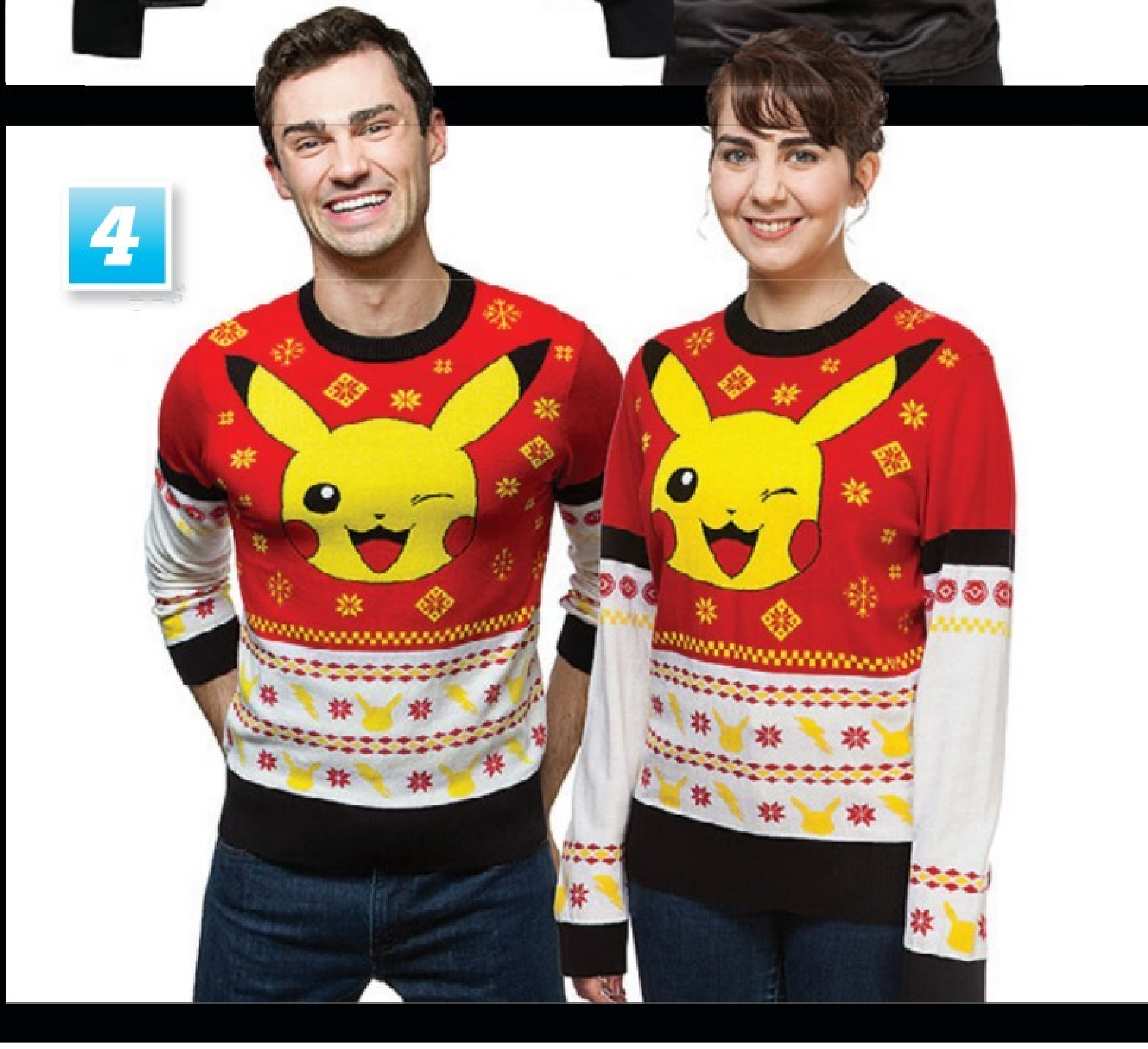
2

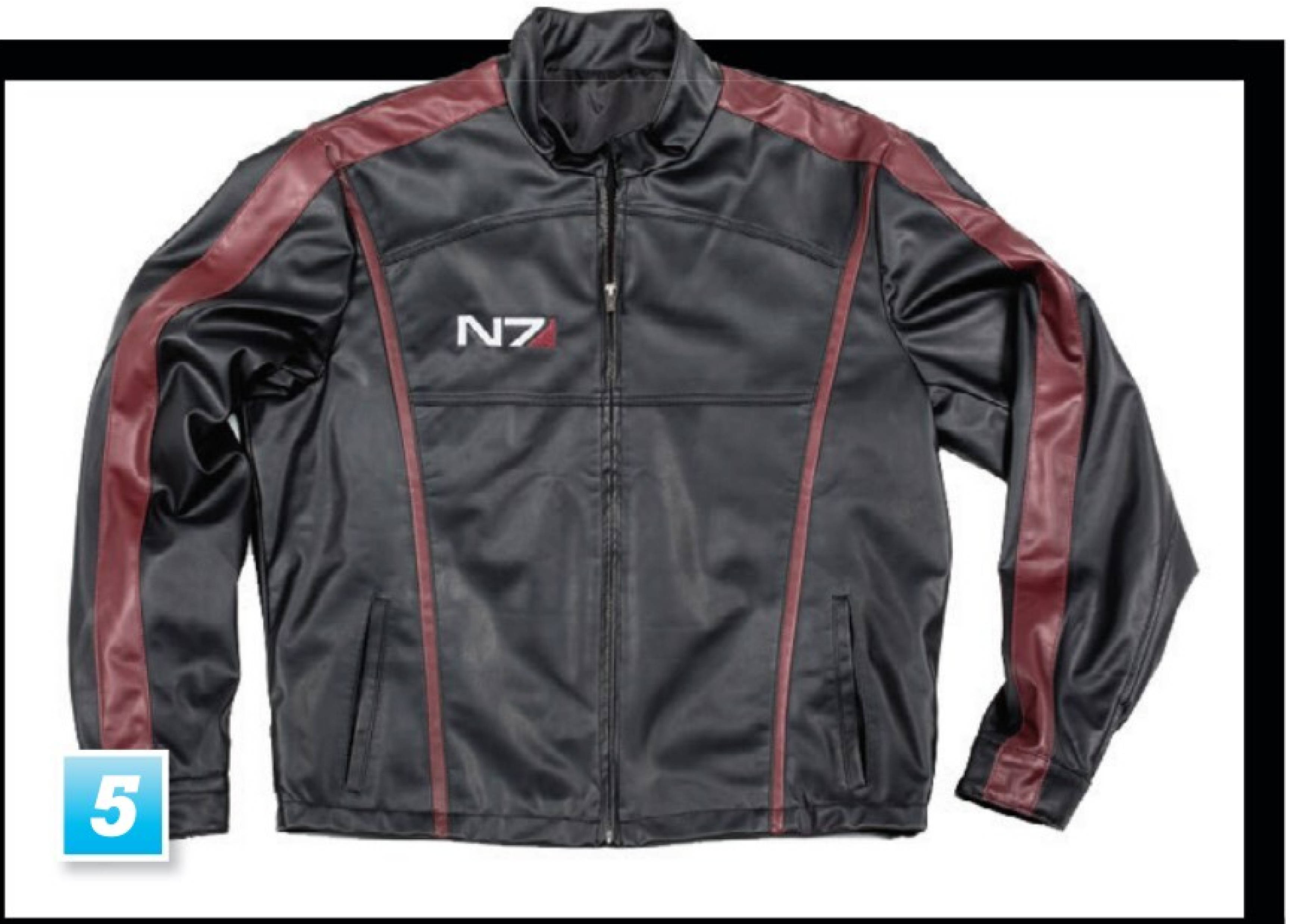


3

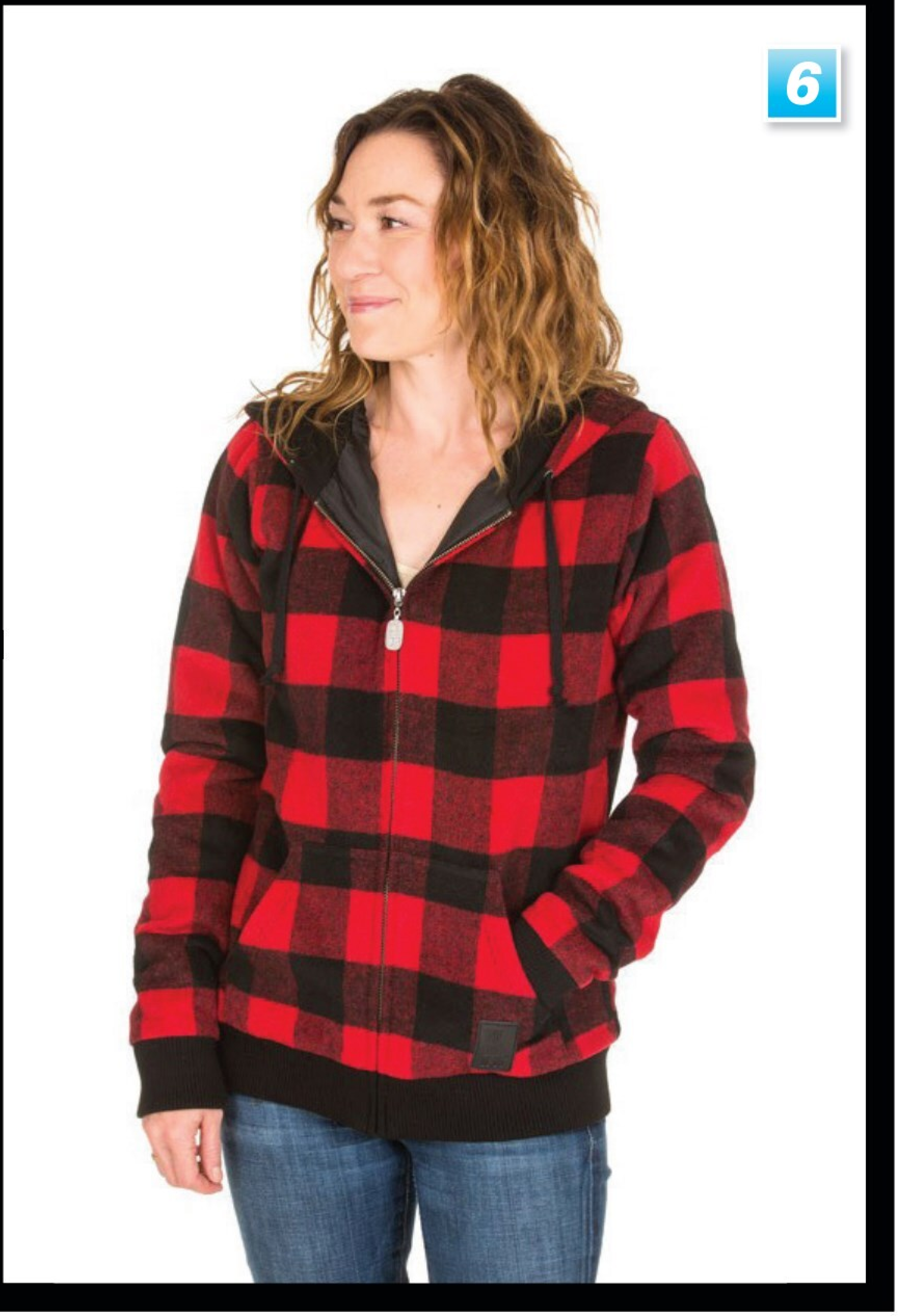


4





5



6

1 Vault 111 Hoodie

Featuring the iconic blue-and-yellow Vault Boy color scheme, the Vault 111 Hoodie is pricey but also very comfortable. There's also something to be appreciated by its minimalist design, articulating an essential part of the Fallout legacy using only two colors and three digits. For those who want to wear a bit of The Wasteland, this hoodie comes in unisex sizes.

$60.00 | store.bethsoft.com

2 Ryu's Varsity Jacket

Sometimes you just need to give off a vibe that says "I can Hadoken you into oblivion." This sleek black jacket, modeled after classic varsity wear, features a portrait of Ryu's determined figure as its inner lining. A great piece in any fighter fan's winter ensemble, this jacket comes in unisex sizing.

$99.99 | thinkgeek.com

3 Overwatch D.Va Bunny Game Face Sweatshirt

Great for wearing while resting at home by the fire or sipping on hot cocoa while you escort the payload, this sweatshirt is a great, no-frills option for when you want to relax and wear something celebrating one of the coolest video game characters of the last few years.

$39.99 | thinkgeek.com

4 Pokémon Pikachu Holiday Sweater

A cheery and classic holiday sweater featuring everyone's favorite electric mouse. What's not to love? A perfect gift for the Pokémon fans in your life as well as something mirthful to wear at family gatherings, the snug cotton sweater's delightful to look at thanks to its patterns of thunderbolts and snowflakes. This sweater comes in both men's and women's sizing and features several variations. The one with Pikachu's cute face on it is our favorite.

$49.99 | thinkgeek.com

5 N7 Faux-Leather Jacket

For those out there who want to dress like galaxy savers, this is a good start. A sleek and impressive unisex version of the leather garment Commander Shepard wears in Mass Effect 3, this N7 jacket is stylish, with red lines running from the shoulders down the arms. The inner lining is also pretty light, making the jacket's fit relaxed and more comfortable than we anticipated.

$98.00 | biowarestore.com

6 Ellie's Red Flannel Hoodie

Part of the official merchandise line of The Last Of Us, this red woman's hoodie is a modified and less torn version of Ellie's unlockable flannel shirt. It's comfortable and low-key stylish enough for you to wear among people who may miss your subtle nod to the beloved game. A light polyfill inner layer will keep you warm during chilly days. Bow and arrow not included.

$39.99 | gear.playstation.com

Single-Player Isn't Dying, It's Evolving

by Brian Shea, Digital Editor

When Electronic Arts announced the closure of Visceral Games and revealed it was going back to the drawing board with its Star Wars action game, the news caused a wave of panic about the imminent death of single-player games. Though the publisher's statement said that the new version of the game would still be single-player and former EA employees stressed this was a migration to open-world games – not a push to completely remove campaigns – that didn't stop a wave of obituary editorials and hysterical posts on social media. While the death of single-player may be greatly exaggerated, this pivot is further evidence that conventional thinking around designing single-player games isn't vanishing, but rather evolving.

Why are publishers and developers pushing toward a more open future? EA claims it's the result of user lab testing and gauging player interest, but other business considerations certainly come to mind as well. Low sales of recent traditional single-player games like Prey and Dishonored 2, both of which struggled at retail despite critical acclaim, likely factor into the conversation. The fact that sprawling open-world games are more commonly selling well probably doesn't hurt this push, either. Over the past several years, titles like The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, Grand Theft Auto V, and Ghost Recon Wildlands have proven that open-world games have the potential to top the sales charts for months – sometimes even years.

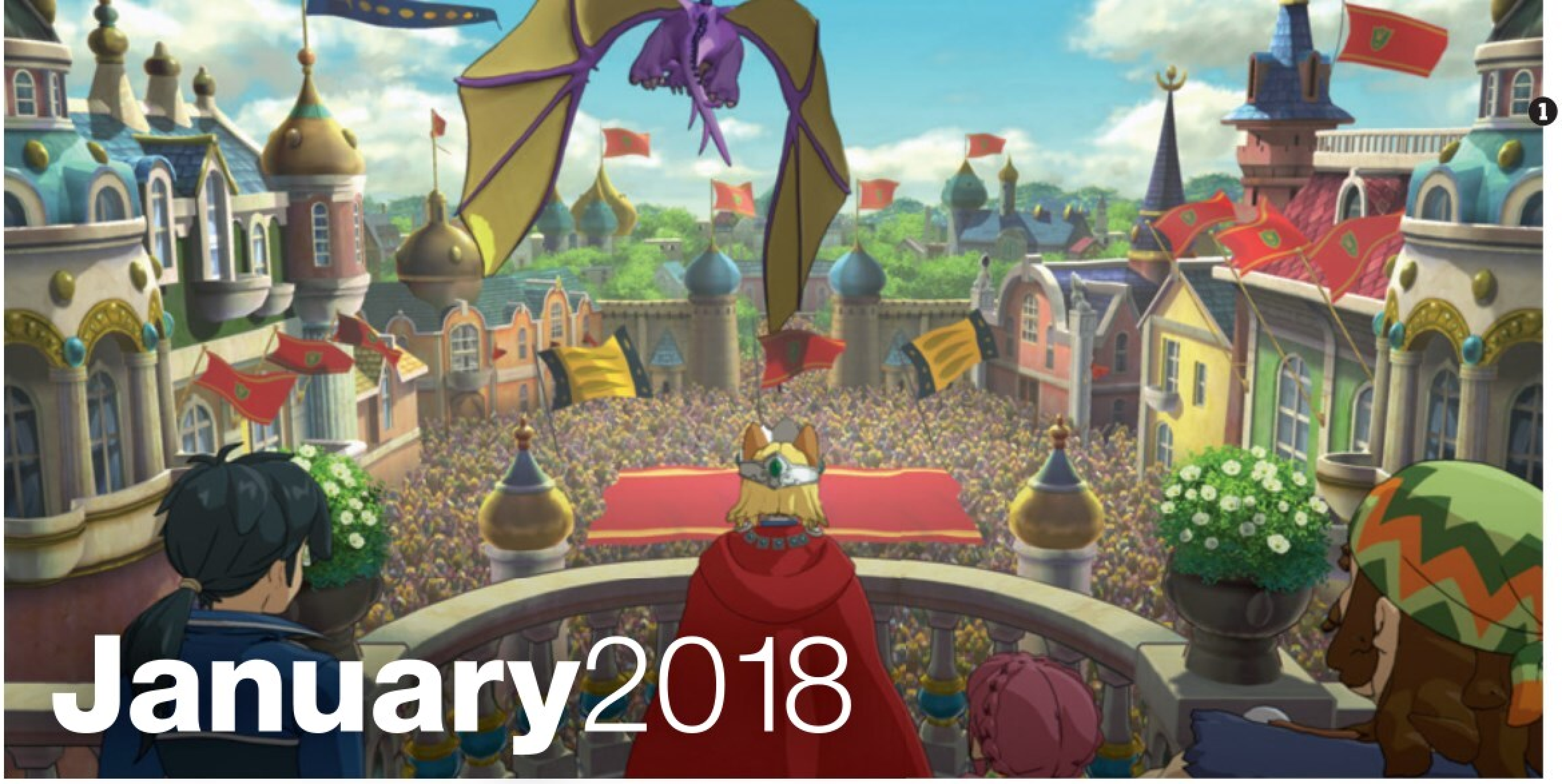
Many recent success stories have stemmed from established franchises placing more focus on open-world design for their single-player campaigns. Rocksteady broke down the corridors of Arkham Asylum for the critically acclaimed Arkham City, while The Witcher 3 and The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild became the series' biggest and most explorable games. Final Fantasy XV was not only more open than any entry in franchise history, but it also implemented a service-based structure to keep new content coming post-release. We've even seen developers traditionally known for their linear games garner more success through open worlds, the most recent example being Guerrilla Games going from Killzone to Horizon Zero Dawn, which brought higher sales numbers.

EA didn't mention it explicitly, but you can surmise that another underlying reason for this trend is the skyrocketing budgets of triple-A games. Fixed pricing means standard editions of triple-A games are typically priced the same regardless of scope, causing publishers to search for additional revenue streams where they can. These supplemental cash sources are easier to implement in open-world games than story-based, linear titles. We've witnessed this recently as games like Middle-earth: Shadow of War and Assassin's Creed Origins have courted controversy for their inclusions of optional microtransaction loot boxes. These tactics have met resistance from a vocal player base. However, despite that disdain, the practice seems to have only served to reinforce the bottom line for publishers, as in most cases the games continue to sell well.

If you find yourself in the camp of wanting traditional single-player experiences, there is good news – outliers always exist. This past year alone, we've seen great traditional single-player campaigns like Persona 5 and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice that feel more aligned with the single-player experiences of yesteryear. That looks to continue next year with highly anticipated releases like God of War and The Last of Us: Part 2. These kinds of experiences will always exist despite any evolution affecting the industry.

With this many great single-player experiences, it clearly demonstrates that a healthy appetite exists for both creating and playing these types of games. Even as publishers evolve their approaches to confront ever-changing business realities, you can still take solace in the fact that single-player games are continuing to improve in meaningful ways. Whether you're talking The Witcher 3's approach to side-quests or the narrative mastery in The Last of Us, these story-focused games continue to push forward and deliver the experiences players crave. Trends come and go, but single-player is here to stay.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer



January2018

GAME RELEASES

Friday 19
- Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth: Hacker's Memory (PS4, Vita)
- Kirby Battle Royale (3DS)
- Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom (PS4, PC) ❶

Tuesday 23
- Lost Sphear (PS4, Switch, PC)

Thursday 25
- The Seven Deadly Sins: Knights of Britannia (PS4)

Friday 26
- Dragon Ball FighterZ (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Monster Hunter: World (PS4, Xbox One)

Tuesday 30
- Dissidia Final Fantasy NT (PS4)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 05
- Insidious: The Last Key (theaters)

Friday 12
- The Commuter (theaters)
- Paddington 2 (theaters)

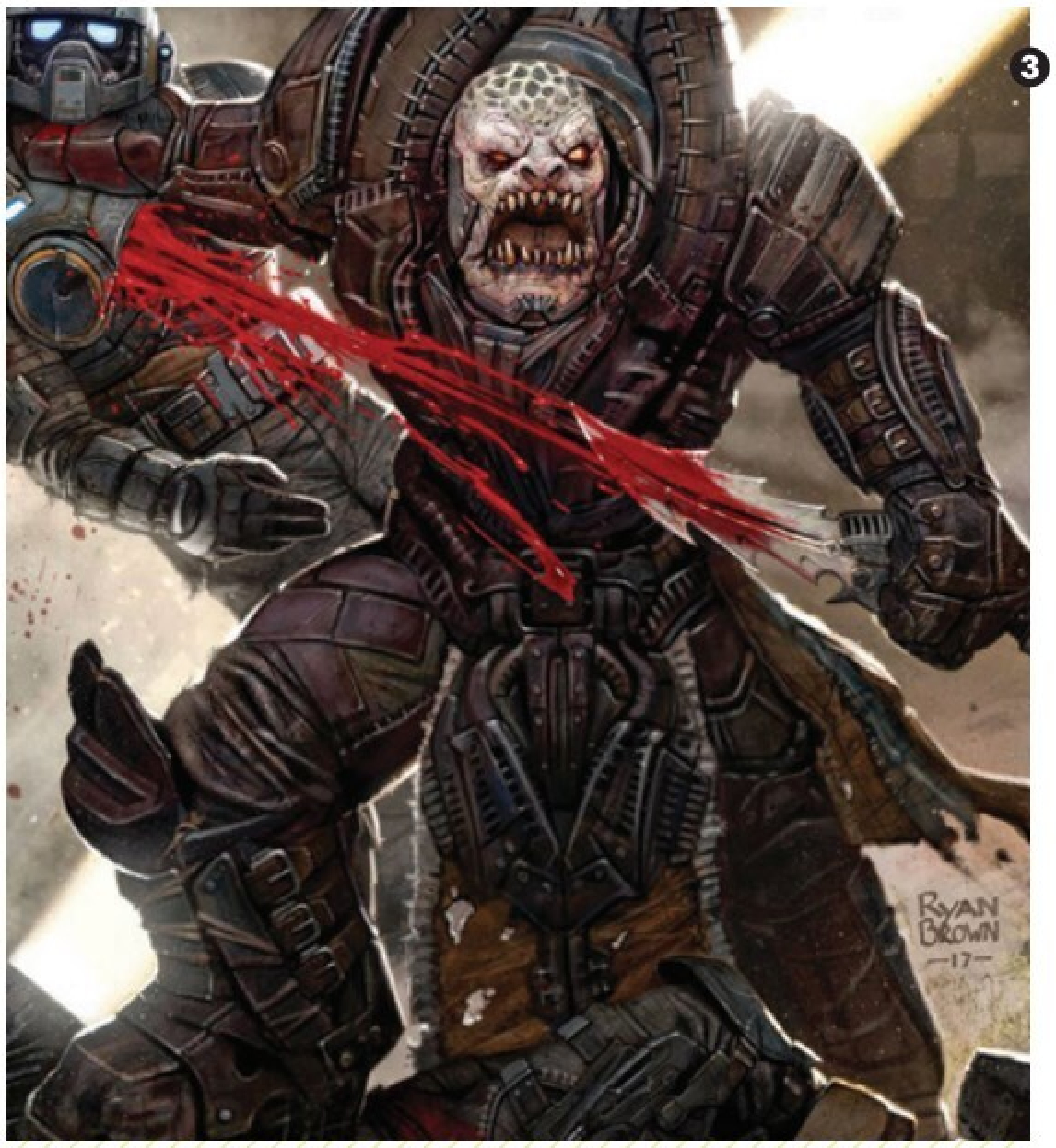
Thursday 18
- Beyond (Freeform)
- Portlandia (IFC)

Friday 19
- 12 Strong (theaters)
- Den of Thieves (theaters)

Monday 22
- The Alienist (TNT)

Friday 26
- Maze Runner: The Death Cure (theaters) ❷

Sunday 28
- 60th Annual Grammy Awards (CBS)



GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 03

Gears of War: The Rise of Raam ❸

Long before the events of Emergence Day, Raam was rising through the Locust ranks. A new comic book series from IDW Publishing called Gears of War: The Rise of Raam! tells this tale, and gives fans a rare look at how the Locus operate. This story is penned by Kurtis Wiebe, with art by Max Dunbar.

Tuesday 09

Consumer Electronic Show 2018

The latest innovations in technology should be on display at this year's CES, held from January 9-12 in Las Vegas. VR and AR are expected to be big players at this show, hopefully giving us a glimpse of what the next generation will deliver.

Friday 12

PAX South

Not much gaming news comes out of PAX South, but if you live near San Antonio, this show is great for checking out the latest in gaming, and allows you to connect with gamers both near and far. The show runs from January 12-14, and offers tournaments, hands-on gaming, a tabletop indie showcase, and more.

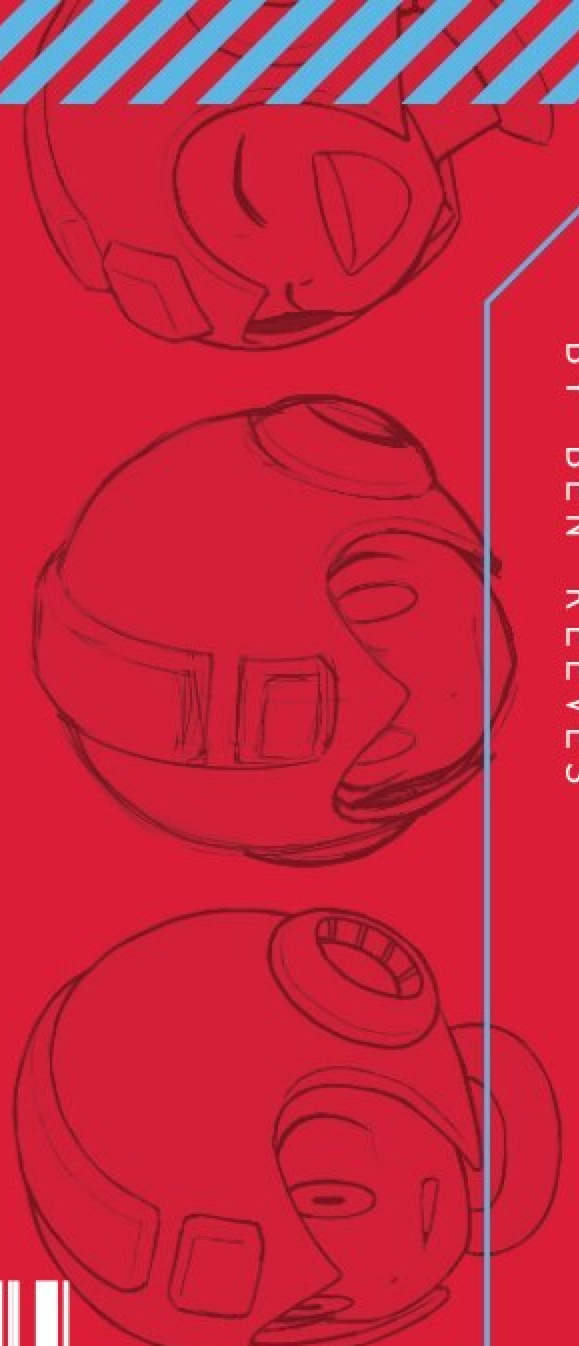
Friday 26

ELeague Boston Major 2018

If you enjoy watching Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, ELeague brings you three days of battles, with 16 teams competing for $1 million in prizes. This tournament is held in Boston's Agganis Arena, and will be streamed online. ◆

BLUE MOON RISING

BY BEN REEVES



An inside look at Capcom's mission to resurrect one of its most important brands: Mega Man

» platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» style
1-Player
Action/Platforming

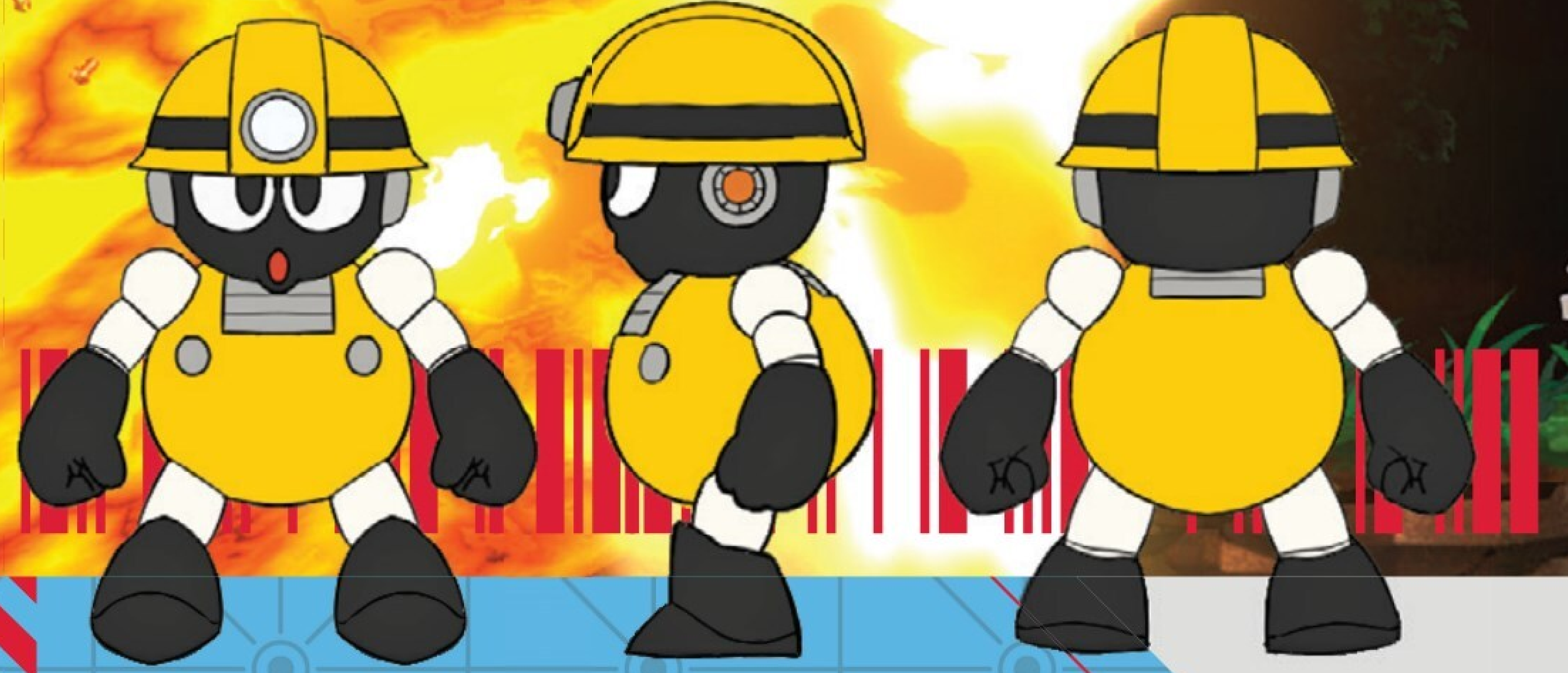
» publisher
Capcom

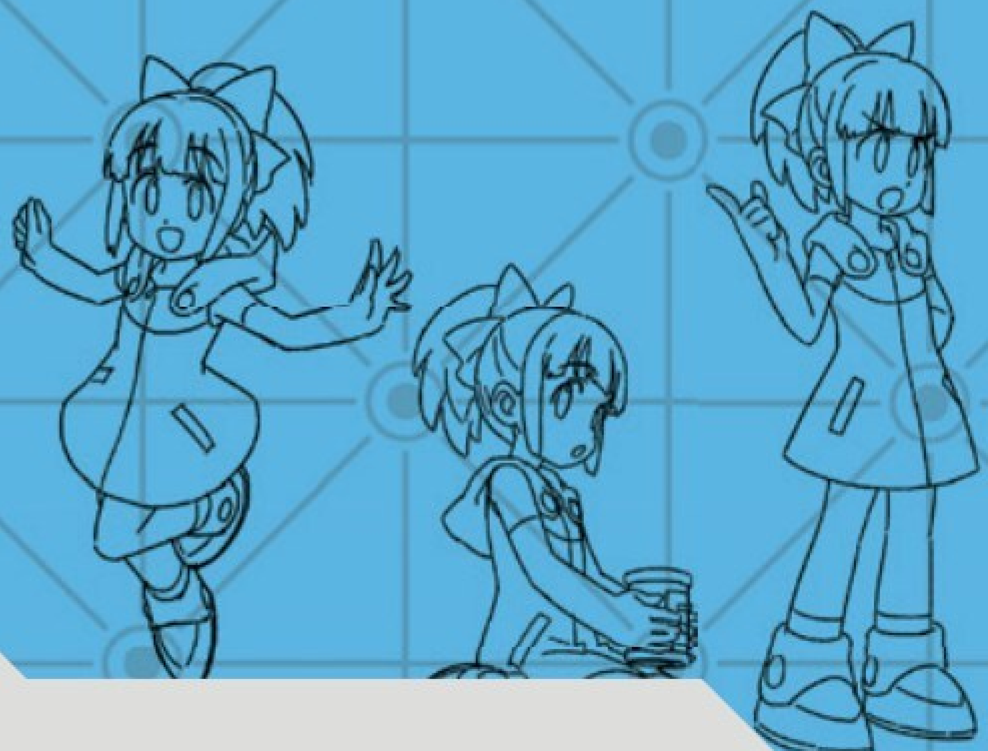
» developer
Capcom

» release
2018

Over the last seven years, Mega Man fans have seen little more than collections and cancelations. Capcom's adorable blue robot was once one of the most prominent icons in gaming, but over the course of a decade many fans began to fear that Mega Man's golden age was over. Others presumed Mega Man was dead.

But Capcom isn't ready to bury its once-iconic hero. The publisher is tapping into what made the original series special and creating an entirely new adventure. Mega Man 11 looks like a return to form, but does Mega Man's 30-year-old formula still hold up? Can Capcom's little blue dude fight to stay relevant in the modern gaming space? We traveled to Japan and went hands-on with Mega Man 11 to find out. Welcome back to the year 20XX.





THE ORIGINAL ROBOT MASTER

No one has had a greater creative influence on the evolution of Mega Man than Keiji Inafune. As part of the six-man team that developed the original Mega Man for the NES back in 1987, Inafune designed and illustrated nearly all the game's characters and enemies as well as the Japanese logo, box art, and instruction manual.

After Mega Man's original creator left during the tumultuous development of Mega Man 3, Inafune stepped up to take over the brand and usher the franchise through several console generations. Inafune's creative hand guided the blue bomber through ten mainline entries as well as several spinoff franchises such as Mega Man X, the Mega Man Battle Network and Star Force RPGs, and two experimental 3D Mega Man Legends games.

Then in 2010, Inafune announced on his personal blog that he had grown frustrated with his job at Capcom and was leaving to form his own companies. Suddenly, Mega Man was without a captain. In the wake of this departure, Capcom canceled its existing Mega Man projects, which included Mega Man Legends 3 and a new side-scrolling adventure called Mega Man Universe, which would have put a focus on user-created content. Many assumed the Mega Man franchise was dead.

"To be honest with you, when Inafune left it was a difficult atmosphere within the company," says Mega Man 11 producer Kazuhiro Tsuchiya. "It was difficult for somebody to step up and say, 'I really want to work on Mega Man.' Inafune-san was definitely a brand leader for the franchise. He helped pave the way for its success, and he had a lot of brilliant ideas. That's an absolute truth. So when he left, there was a sense of emptiness, and a sense that no one was appropriate to pick up the mantle and pave a new vision for Mega Man."

In less than a quarter century, Mega Man had managed to appear in over 100 titles, but after the release of Mega Man 10 and the departure of Mega Man's main creative force, Capcom's blue mascot faded into the background. Fans wondered if Capcom had forgotten about this gaming mainstay. Was the developer really going to let this once-iconic character fall by the wayside?

Fortunately, there were members inside Capcom asking the same question.

RESURRECTING THE BLUE BRAND

Koji Oda grew up on Capcom games. As a young student in the 1980s, Oda would sneak out to the arcades whenever he could. Whenever he scrounged up enough money, he would buy games for his NES. Unfortunately, gaming magazines were scarce and the internet was primordial, so gamers rarely knew if a game was going to be good before they bought it. Oda felt like half the games he purchased turned out to be duds.

"Sometimes you would buy a game and it would be a 'kusoge,' which literally translates into s----y game," Oda says. "But then there was Capcom, which always had the Capcom logo on it. Those games were always promising. There were no 'kusoge' coming out of Capcom. That was the main reason I decided to apply to work here. I figured that if a company was able to make games that were this fun, it had to be fun to work there."

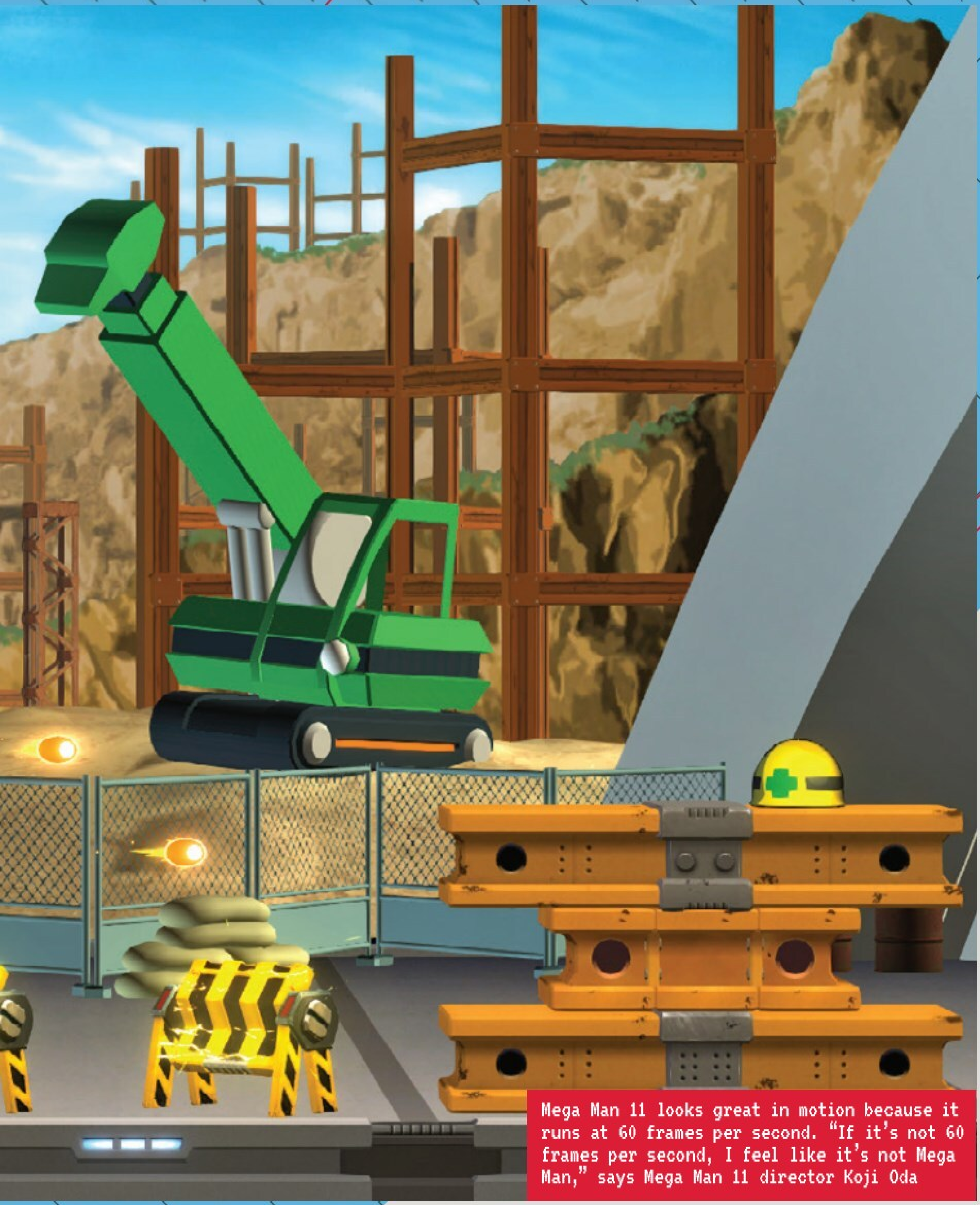
Oda joined Capcom in 1991 and began work on titles like Super Ghouls 'n' Ghosts, The Magical Quest Starring Mickey Mouse, and Mighty Final Fight. During this period, the games industry saw massive growth as video games grew in popularity. On the development side, games took only six months to a year to develop, which allowed Oda to work on a number of different projects in a relatively short window.

"It's not that well known, but before Resident Evil went to the PlayStation, I was working on it for the Super NES," Oda says. "It was back before the name Resident Evil had even been assigned to it. The codename was literally just 'horror game' … but the PlayStation came out right when we were still working on it, so we had to completely overhaul the game for the new system." Oda continued to tap into his love for horror when he directed Resident Evil 0.

During Oda's 26-year history with Capcom, the designer has helped oversee projects as far ranging as Dead Rising: Chop Till You Drop and the 2014 Strider reboot, but he never had the chance to touch Mega Man. After Inafune left the company in 2010, Oda began to wonder what Capcom had planned for the little blue robot.

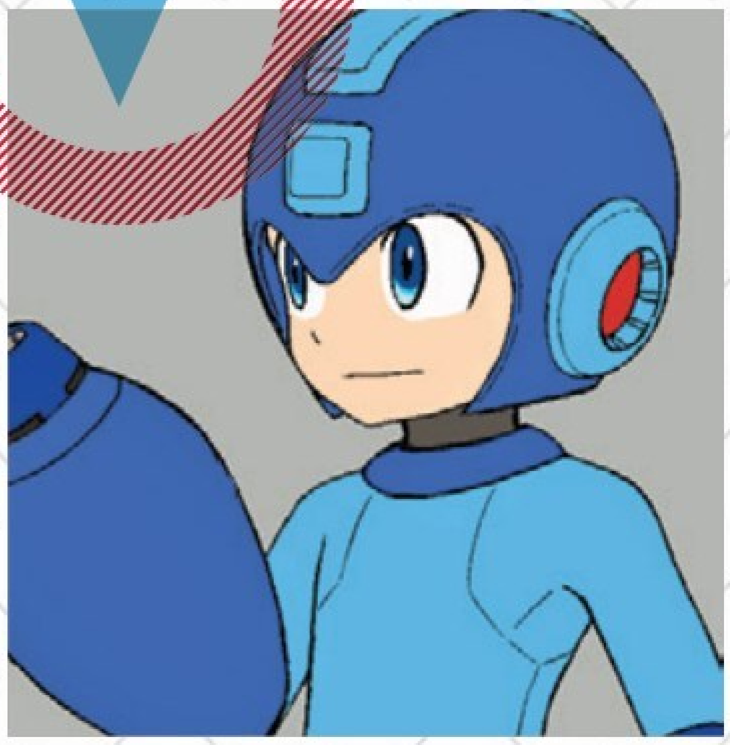
"I still feel like Mega Man is one of the most important pillars of the company," Oda says. "At the end of the day, we asked ourselves, 'What does Capcom need to do for its fans? Should we act like Mega Man is a thing of the past? Should we toss him aside?' I felt like that would be a foolish gesture. Mega Man is such a treasure to the company that it would be a waste to let him go because someone left."

Over the years, Capcom has received "a few internal pitches" to revive the Mega Man brand, but Oda was the first to get the official greenlight. After an eight-year hiatus, He was selected to direct the next mainline entry in the Mega Man series. Mega Man was coming back. Now, Oda just had to do everything in his power to ensure Capcom didn't make a kusoge.



Mega Man 11 looks great in motion because it runs at 60 frames per second. "If it's not 60 frames per second, I feel like it's not Mega Man," says Mega Man 11 director Koji Oda

The Subtle Art Of Designing Mega Man



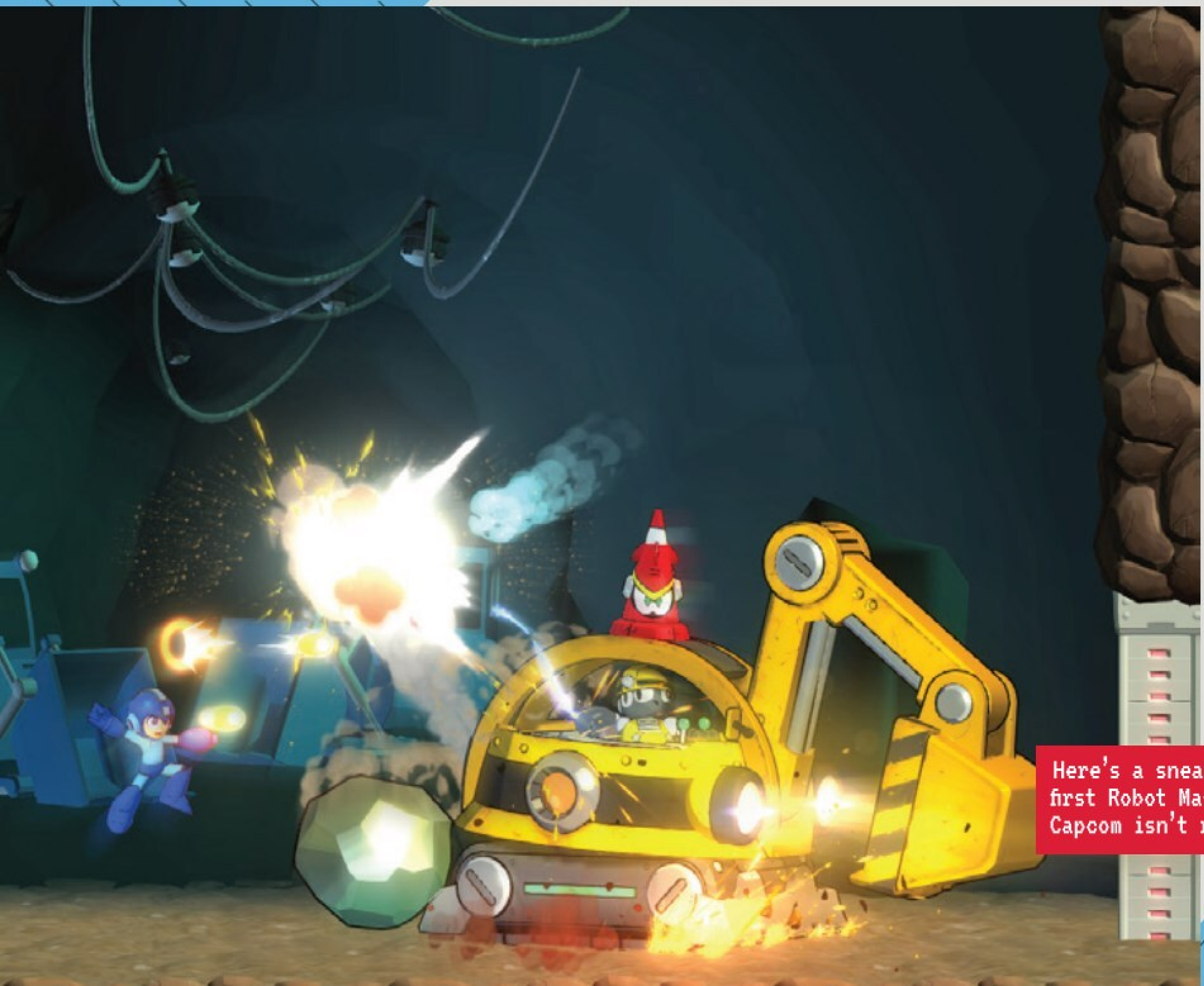
Mega Man's new design might not look significantly different from his previous incarnations, but a keen eye might notice some changes. However, when Capcom first toyed with redesigning the character, it explored several wild ideas.

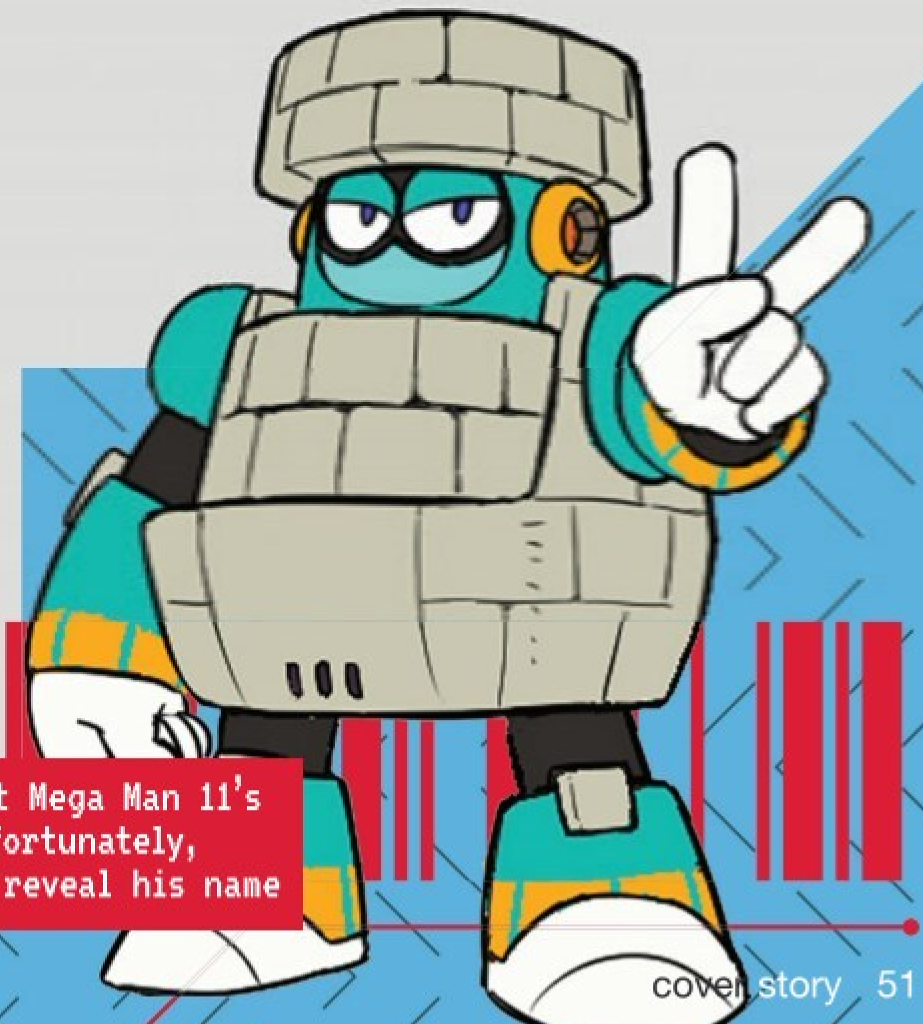
"We thought about making him super masculine," says director Koji Oda. "We asked ourselves, 'Do we want to make him look super pretty? Do we want to give him some glasses?' But ultimately, we decided that none of that was necessary, so we went back to his classic look."

Art Director Yuji Ishihara, who has been working at Capcom since 1995 on games such as Mega Man Legends and Mega Man Battle Network, thinks he has the perfect formula for designing the character. "I think if you break Mega Man down into ten points, he has six points in cool, three points in cute, and one point in naïve," he says.

For Mega Man 11's slight remodel, Ishihara wanted to make sure that Mega Man came across clearly as a robot, but also retained some of his childlike qualities. Mega Man has always been a character that kids can appreciate and empathize with, and Capcom wants to make sure that doesn't change with Mega Man 11.

"I liked the visual look of the Nintendo days, so I kept true to that and went with a more adolescent body composition with bigger eyes and less color," Ishihara says. "There is a fine balance between cute and menacing with all the characters. I want players to be sad when they defeat enemies. I kind of envision it as: They're all having fun on the playground."





Here's a sneak peak at Mega Man 11's first Robot Master. Unfortunately, Capcom isn't ready to reveal his name

RETURN OF THE BLUE BOMBER

Capcom gave Oda and his team a relatively blank check to do what they want with this new Mega Man game. This ended up being a blessing and a curse, because the team quickly realized that it could take Mega Man in almost any direction.

"You could build a mountain with all the different concepts we came up with, but we wanted to make sure that whatever we implemented would maintain that simplicity and durability of gameplay," Oda says. "It's called Mega Man 11, but there was actually a heavy amount of discussion to get us to that point. A lot of us asked, 'What do we want to call this? Do we want to take it in a brand-new direction and call it something totally different?' At the end of the day we decided we wanted to be as straightforward as possible and tell people, 'This is what you've been waiting for.'"

Ultimately, the team wanted to hold true to Mega Man's classic gameplay while updating its look. Since Mega Man 9 and 10 both tapped the series' classic 8-bit style, Oda felt like they needed to move forward. In order to test a new art style, the team took some of their favorite levels from Mega Man 5 and 10 and redesigned them with a modern anime look. This helped the team home in on the right aesthetic while ensuring that the new art meshed with Mega Man's classic gameplay.

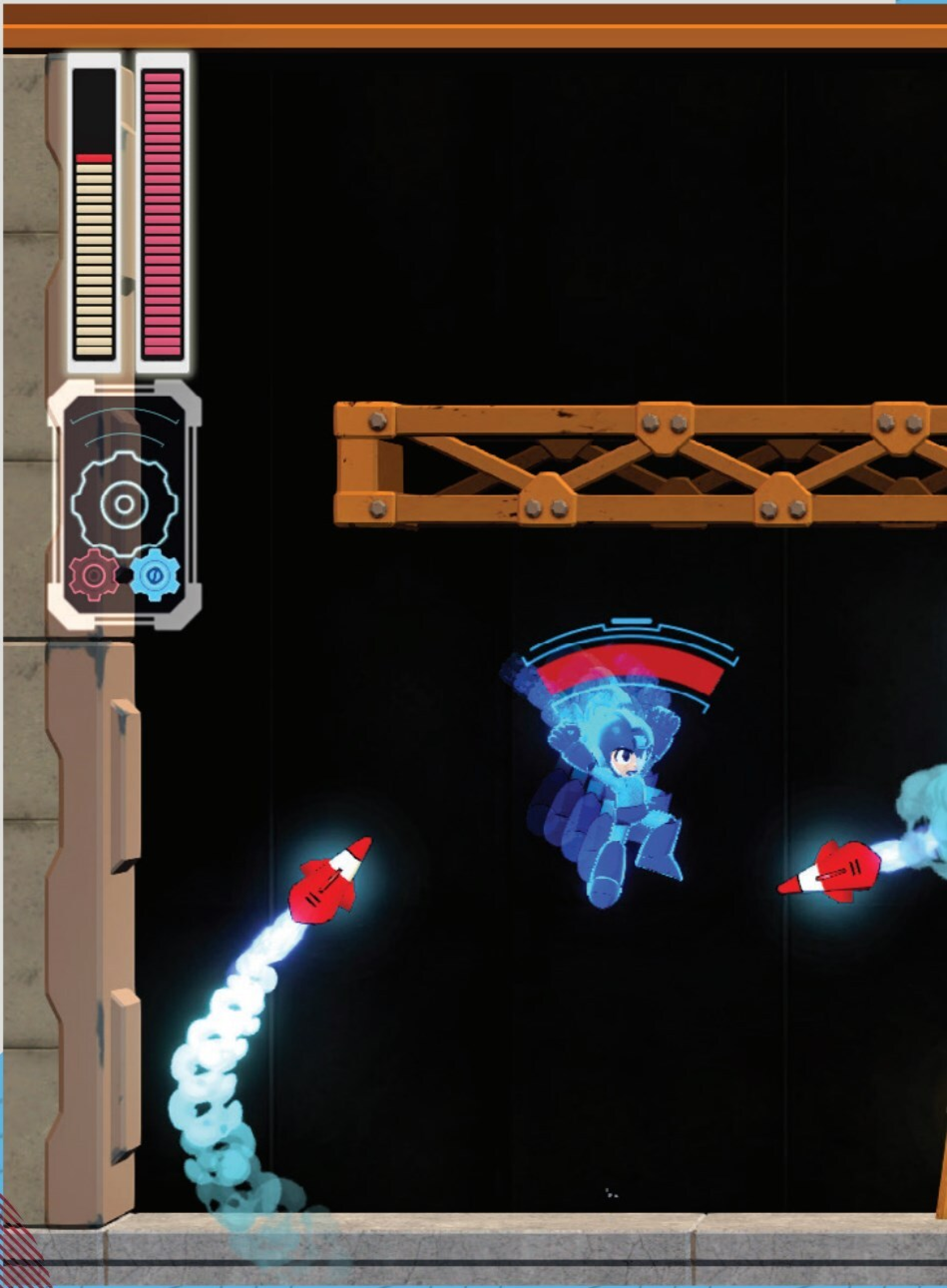
"Late in the series, we had heightened the animation quality so much that it actually impeded the controls and it was less intuitive to figure out combat timings," says Oda. "That was a hurdle that we had to tackle for this. That was something I felt we had to address, because by pushing the visuals forward, I felt we risked taking a step back in gameplay."

To better define the "authentic" Mega Man's gameplay, Oda ordered his entire team to play through the mainline Mega Man series as well as the Mega Man X series and take note of the things that made each game special. Oda also scoured message boards and read fan surveys about their favorite Mega Man moments.

"It's always interesting reading the feedback from America," Oda says. "It's almost like they're talking about a game that came out yesterday even though it's been so many years. I find it interesting opening up that survey box to see what they have to say."

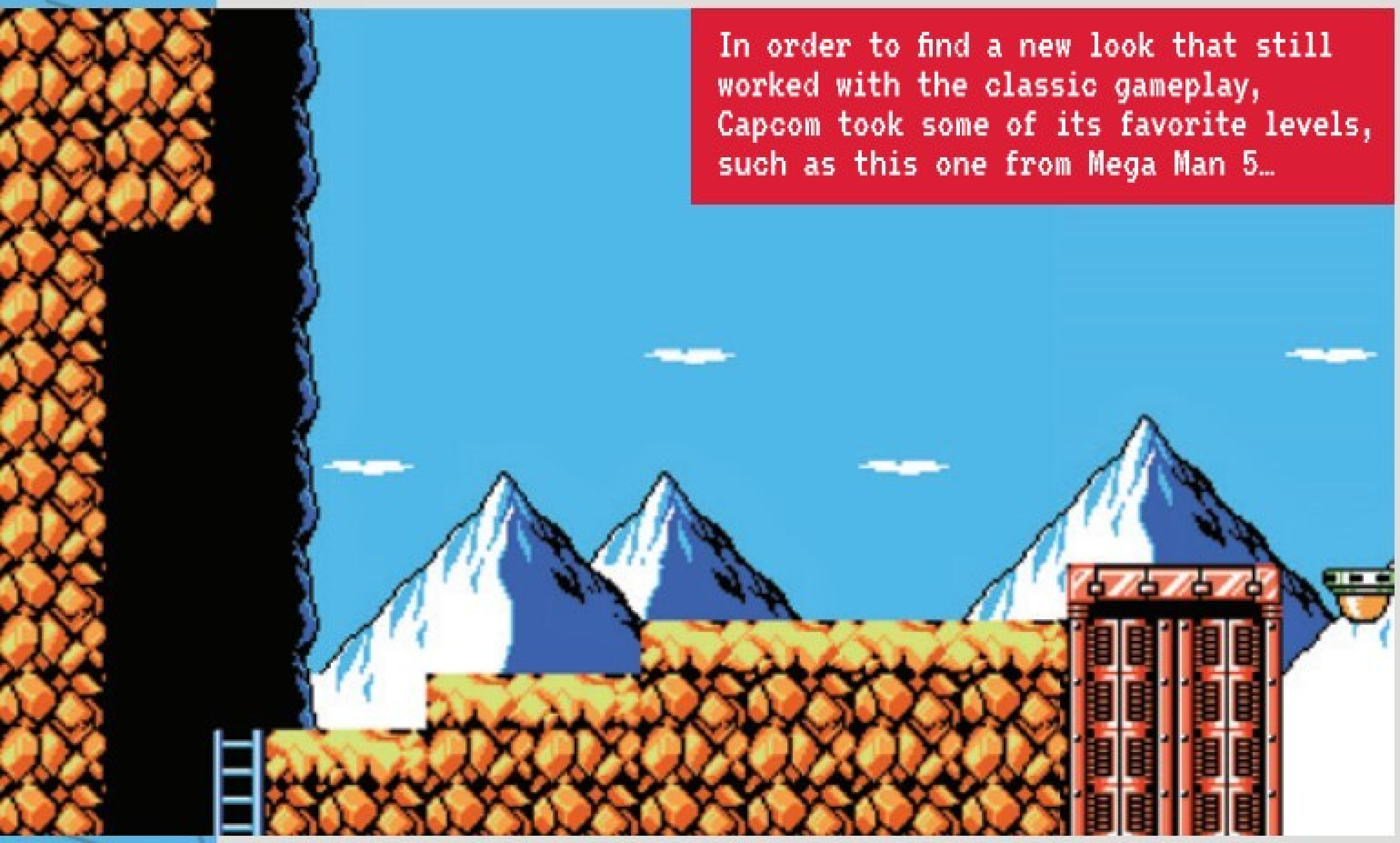
After Oda's core team of designers fleshed out the concepts for Mega Man 11, the director knew he needed to build up a team that could put those ideas into action. Oda pulled strings around Capcom's offices and hand-picked some of his favorite designers. Strangely enough, many of these designers were hesitant to work on the next Mega Man game.

"I think some of that doubt stems from the fact that Mega Man has such a long history," Tsuchiya says. "It's been 30 years in the making, and Mega Man has such a core fan base. I think that when you have a dedicated fan base, the expectation to deliver is that much higher. When you have a franchise like this that has had more than a seven-year absence, that hole of expectation is so big that you have to ask yourself, 'Can that hole be filled? Can we actually meet people's expectations?'"

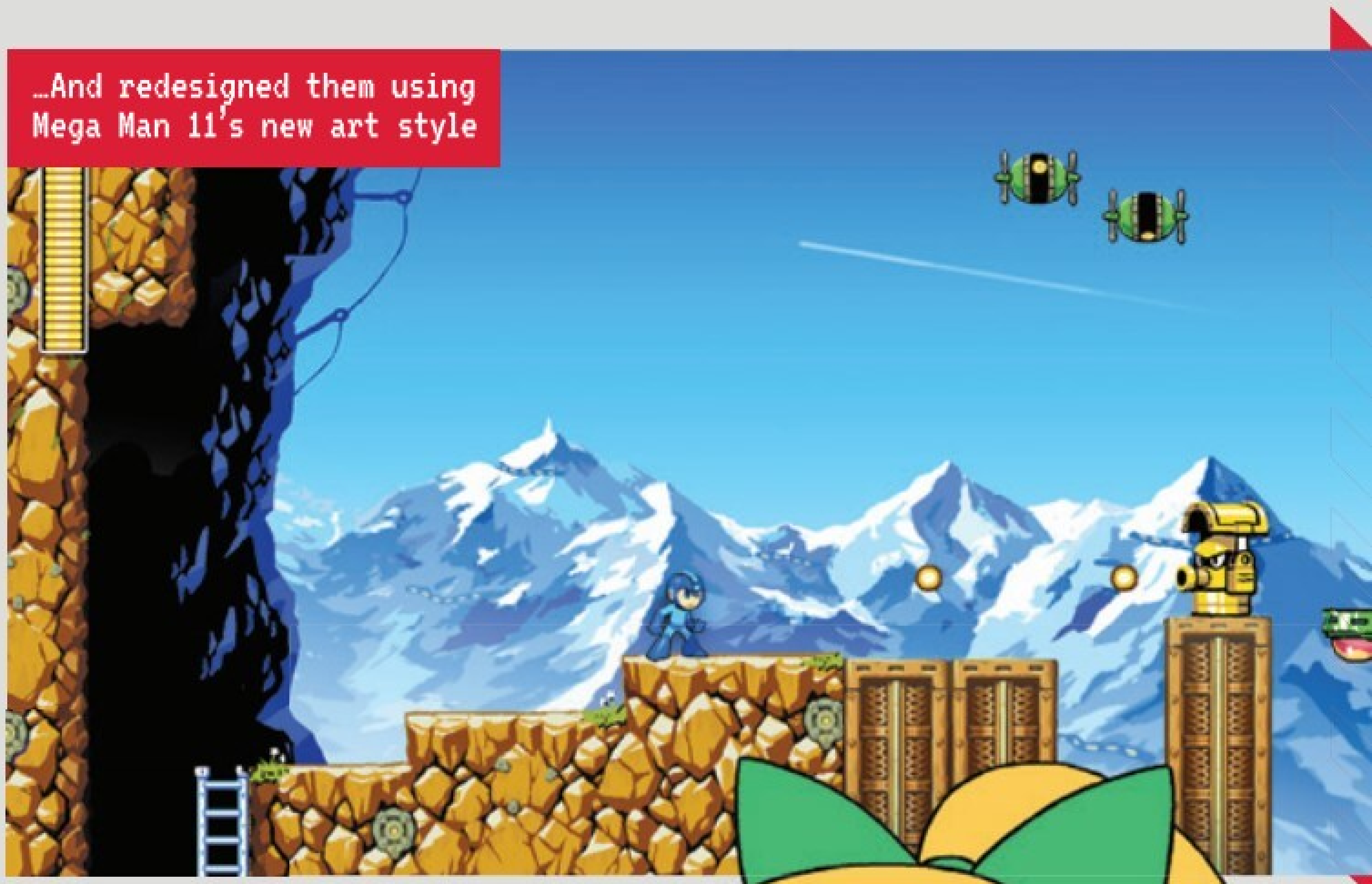


Why Is Mega Man More Popular In America?

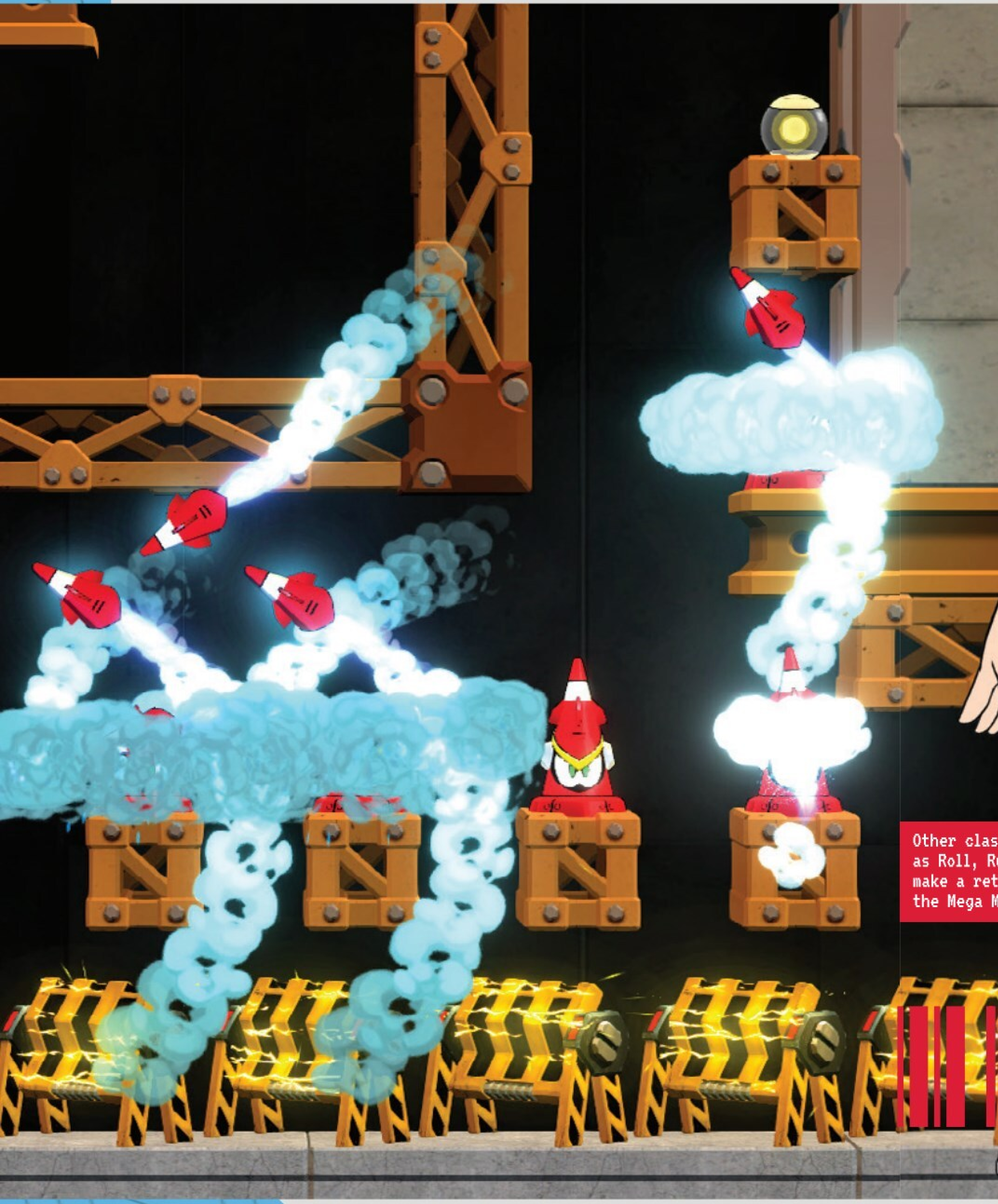
Across the world, Mega Man is most popular in America, so when Capcom began work on a new Mega Man, it first surveyed players in the U.S. We asked Mega Man 11 producer Kazuhiro Tsuchiya for his insight into why Mega Man is more popular in America. "To be honest with you, I don't know why," he says. "This is just purely speculation, but I think games where players are able to showcase how good they are, I feel like those games tend to be more popular in the states, and Mega Man is like that."

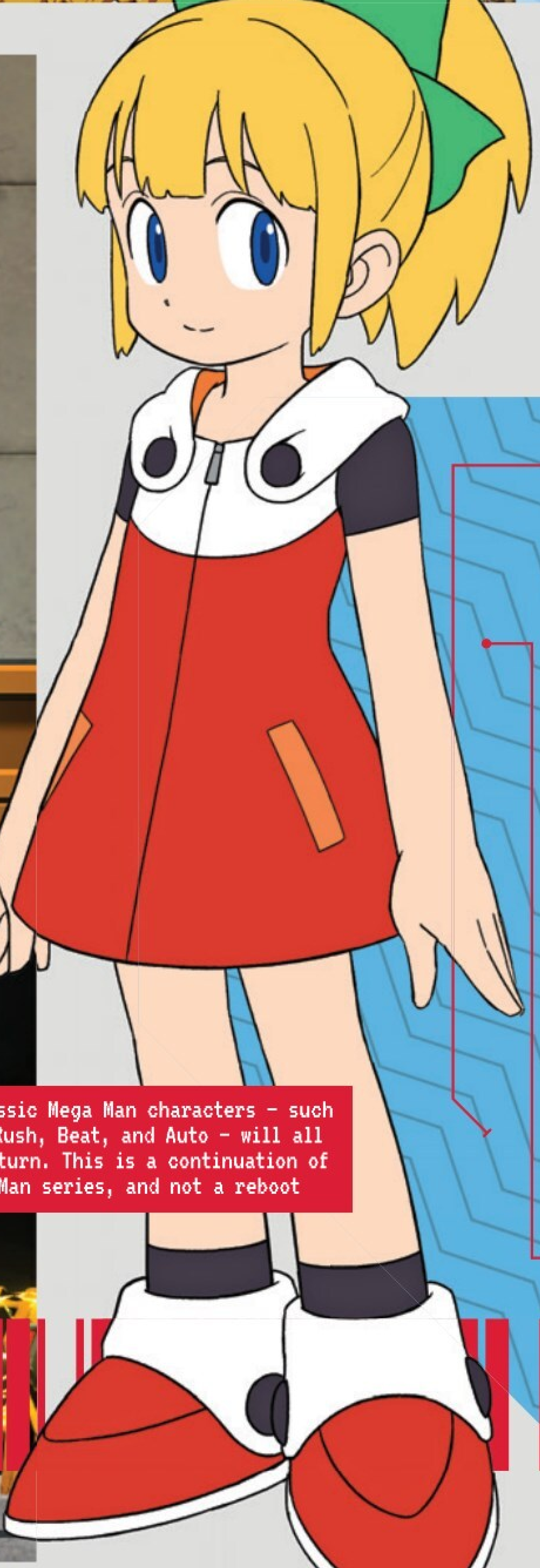


In order to find a new look that still worked with the classic gameplay, Capcom took some of its favorite levels, such as this one from Mega Man 5…

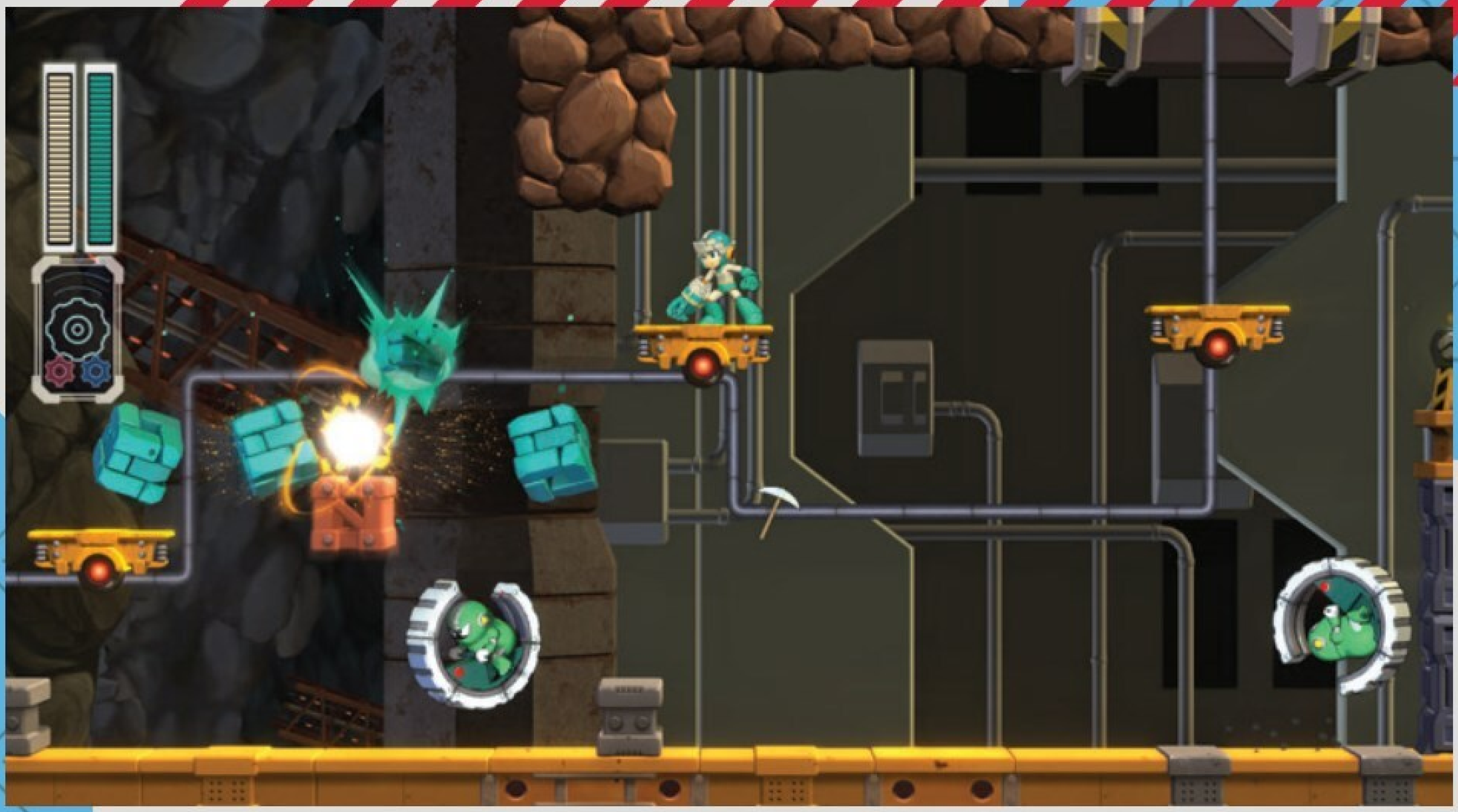


…And redesigned them using Mega Man 11's new art style





Other classic Mega Man characters – such as Roll, Rush, Beat, and Auto – will all make a return. This is a continuation of the Mega Man series, and not a reboot



THIS ROCK'S READY TO ROLL

The Japanese have a saying: "Climb over your own corpse and get better." Director Oda shares this idiom with us as we sit down to play the game. The saying can be taken as a mantra for perseverance: A person should learn from their failures and use that knowledge to overcome their next challenge. For Oda, this saying is a mantra for game development. It's also a coy way of telling us that Mega Man 11 presents a worthy challenge.

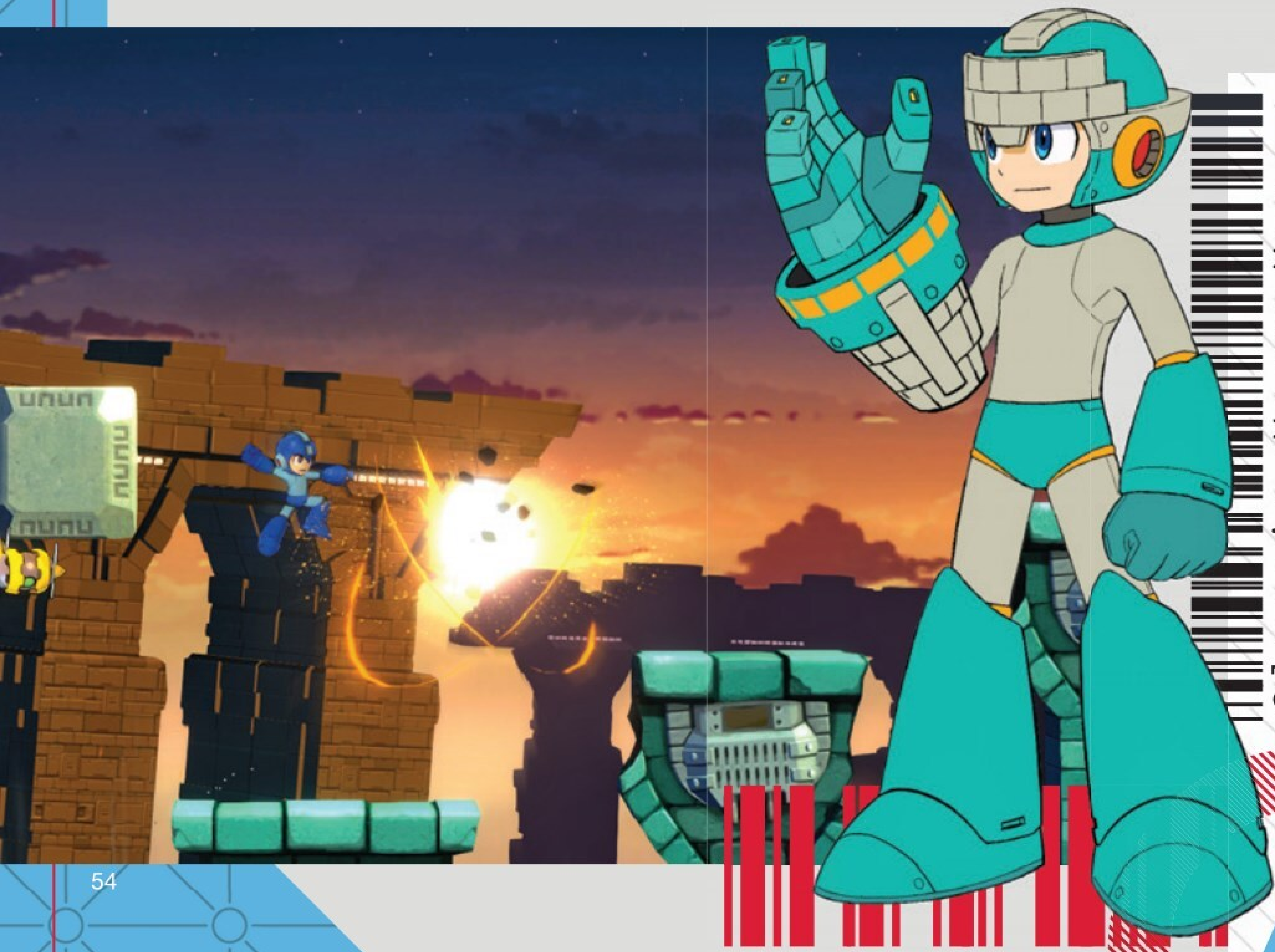
The Mega Man games have always offered a challenge, but the series' precise controls and predictable enemy behavior help alleviate frustration. Overcoming Mega Man's difficulty is often a thrill, not a chore. From what we've played, Mega Man 11 lives up to that legacy. Mega Man's movements feel incredibly tight and responsive. His slide move returns, which makes it easy to dodge enemy attacks and other falling obstacles. Meanwhile, Mega Man's charged buster shot remains a satisfying way to deal with groups of small enemies or power through larger obstacles.

"One of the biggest things I've learned in my time in games is mastering the controls," Oda says. "No matter how good the visuals are, or how good the sounds are, at the end of the day, if you pick up and play the game and it doesn't feel right then it's a failure."

However, Capcom doesn't want to turn away casual fans or players looking for a less stressful experience, which is why the team has implemented a difficultly system with four tiers. Changing Mega Man 11's difficulty does more than alter a player's health and damage output. On easier difficulties, players have extra platforms during challenging platforming sequences, less space between checkpoints, and other support systems designed to make their playthrough more enjoyable. We select the normal difficulty, which is designed to offer a traditional Mega Man experience, and get ready to climb over our corpse.

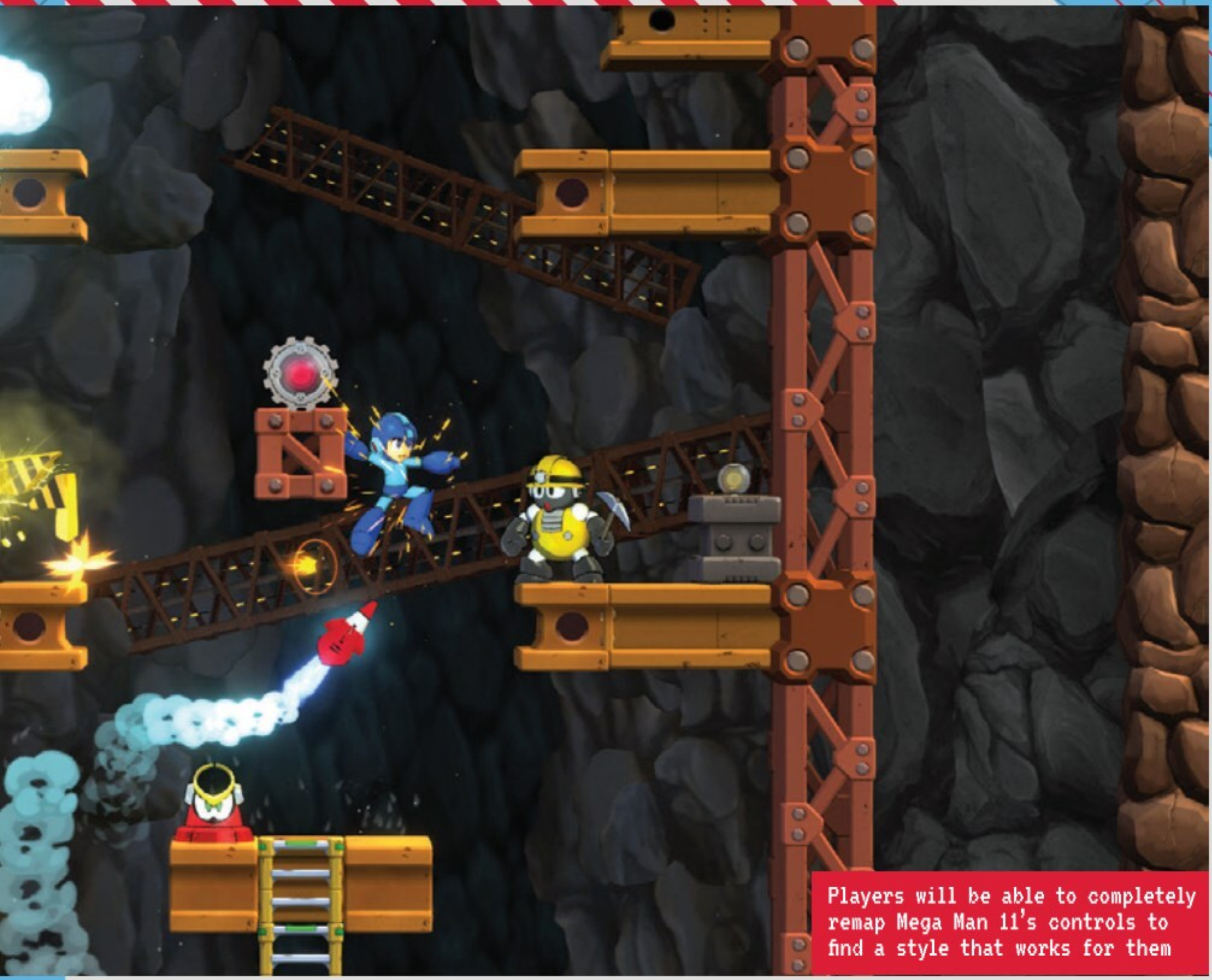
Following the series' tradition, players can pick the order they tackle each of the eight Robot Masters in Mega Man 11. Unfortunately, Capcom isn't ready to talk about these bosses. We can say that the first Robot Master we encountered looked like he's made of brick or stone. Oda tells us that his original Japanese name was Renga Man, which translates into Brick Man, but this character's name has since been changed. In the game's lore, this robot was one of Dr. Light's most beloved creations.

"We went back to the original concept, where the robot masters were created by



Classic Mega Man — With A Twist

Mega Man 11 features the classic Mega Man gameplay that fans have come to expect, but during our hands-on time we played around with an entirely new gameplay mechanic that will impact Mega Man's moment-to-moment action. The little gear icons, which can be seen under Mega Man's health on the screens on these pages, tease this new mechanic. Unfortunately, we can't talk about this feature just yet, but we feel that it's a nice addition to the action and helps balance the difficulty. "It's still a work in progress," says director Koji Oda. "We definitely have that state of mind that you're always up against death, but this time you have more tools at your disposal, so you can face death and still have fun."



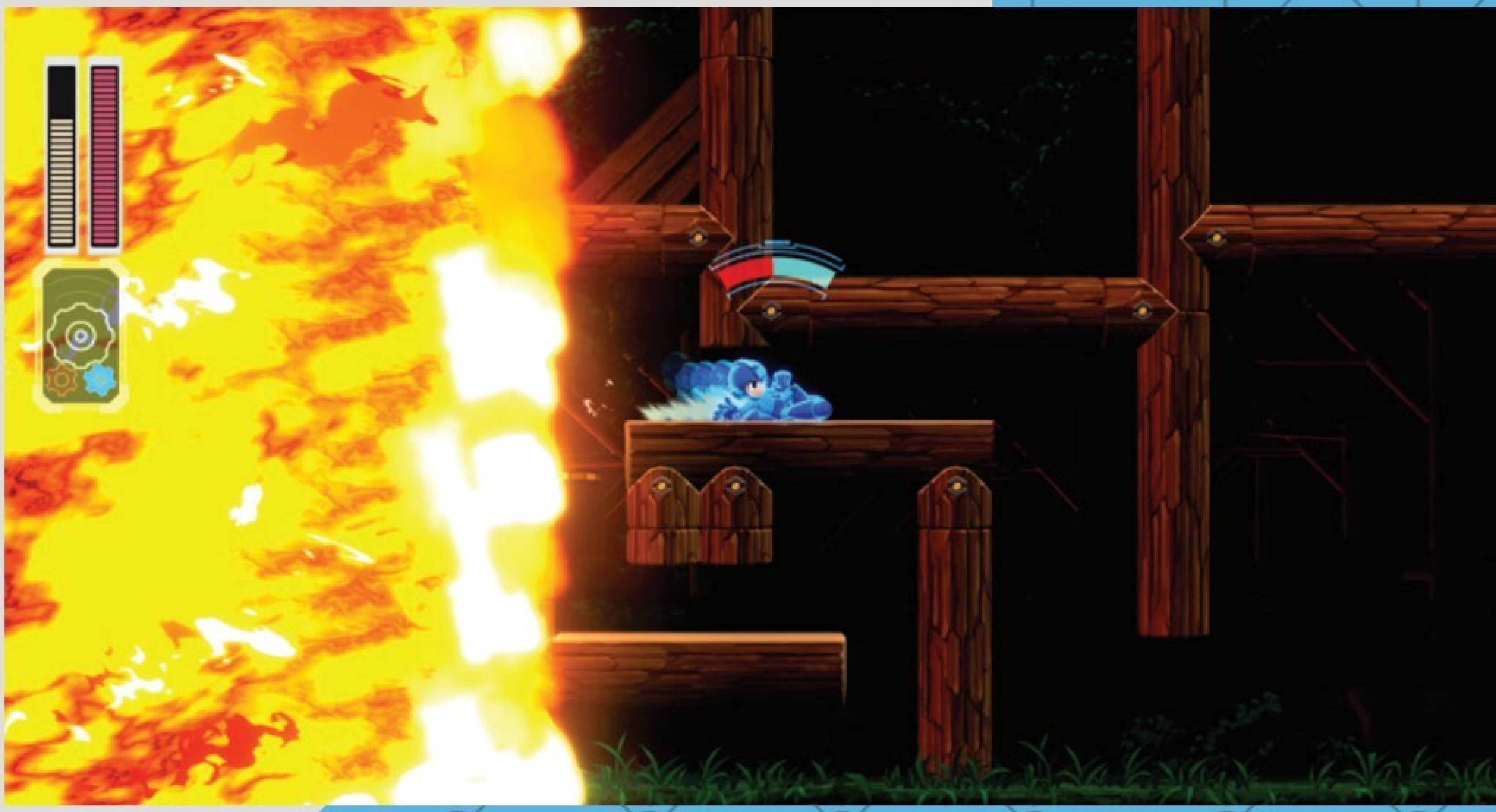
Players will be able to completely remap Mega Man 11's controls to find a style that works for them

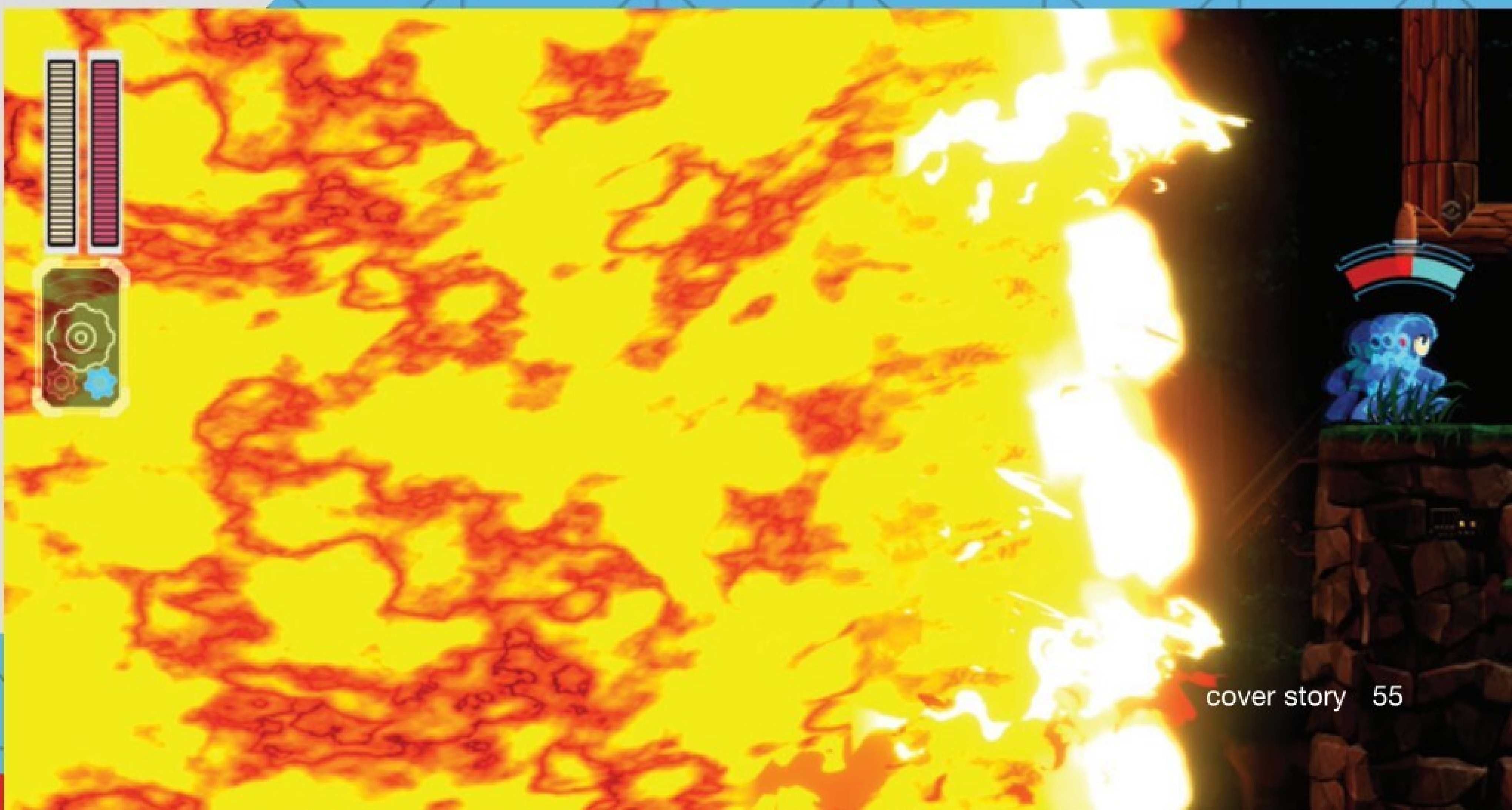
Dr. Light then kidnapped by Dr. Wily and modified for evil purposes," Oda says. "I think with every Mega Man game, it's all about Dr. Wily doing something devious, but we wanted to go back to the original plot where Mega Man is fighting against former allies. We thought that was just inherently more interesting and added a little more depth."

This mysterious Robot Master's stage is themed around Ancient Egypt. Giant pyramids loom large in the background as Mega Man bounds through a series of falling and sliding blocks. The image of the Robot Master can occasionally be seen etched into the side of a rock face. Old excavation equipment sits idle in this giant mining site.

"We actually modeled this area off destruction," Oda says. "That means things being destroyed in front of you, and being able to destroy things yourself. I can't tell if this is a Japanese thing, but when we envision large blocks, we envision them being stacked on top of each other or being destroyed."

This pyramid level is the first stage that Capcom designed, and the studio expects that players will have the easiest time working through it. As we cruise through a couple of platforming challenges and take out a series of enemies wielding giant hammers, we notice the sun has started to set. This detail hints at the fact that stages might slowly evolve as players work through them. The sunset signals that we've reached the end of the level, and we slide open a giant garage-sized door and walk into the boss room. It's time to expand Mega Man's arsenal.



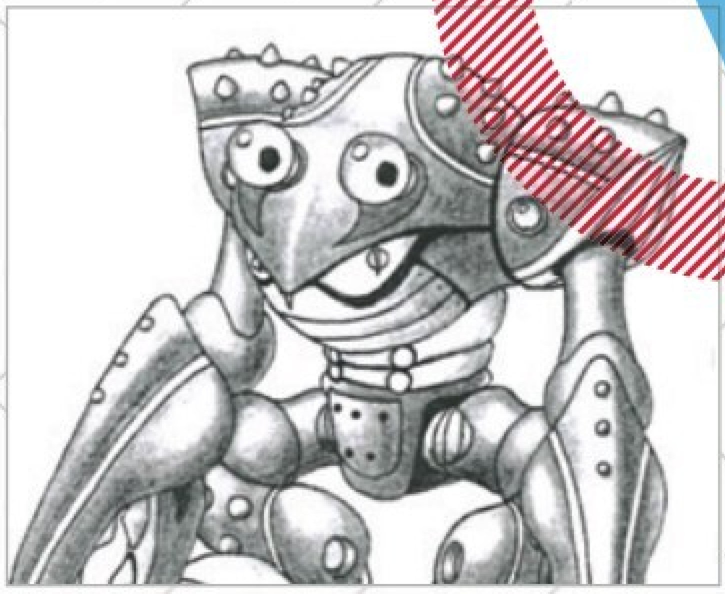


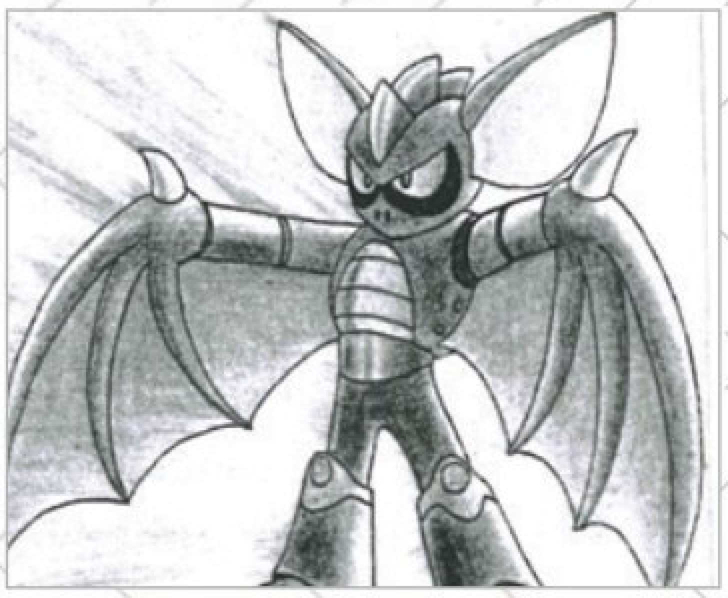
Female Robot Empowerment

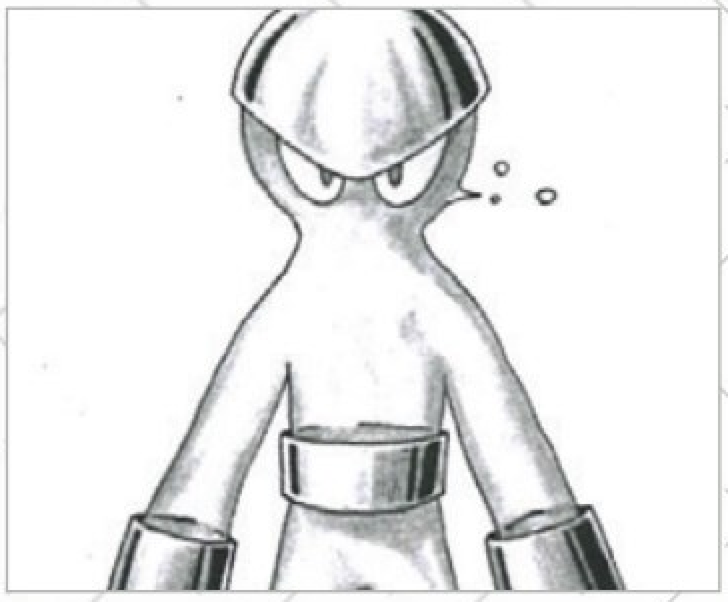
Over the years, Mega Man has received a small amount of criticism for the fact that the names of most of its Robot Masters end in Man and not Woman. In fact, out of all 11 of the mainline Mega Man games, only one has ever featured a female Robot Master [Splash Woman, Mega Man 9]. We asked director Koji Oda for his take on this strange phenomenon.

"There actually was a female robot master at the concept stage [for Mega Man 11], but when we paired up all the different weapons, she was one of the Robot Masters that didn't make the cut," he says. We definitely feel like there are plenty of opportunities to add a female Robot Master in the future. This is one of those things where we feel like it's all about what fits best for each occasion, and there are definitely occasions where a female would be more appropriate than a male."

Mega Man Boss Character Contest's Secret Entry



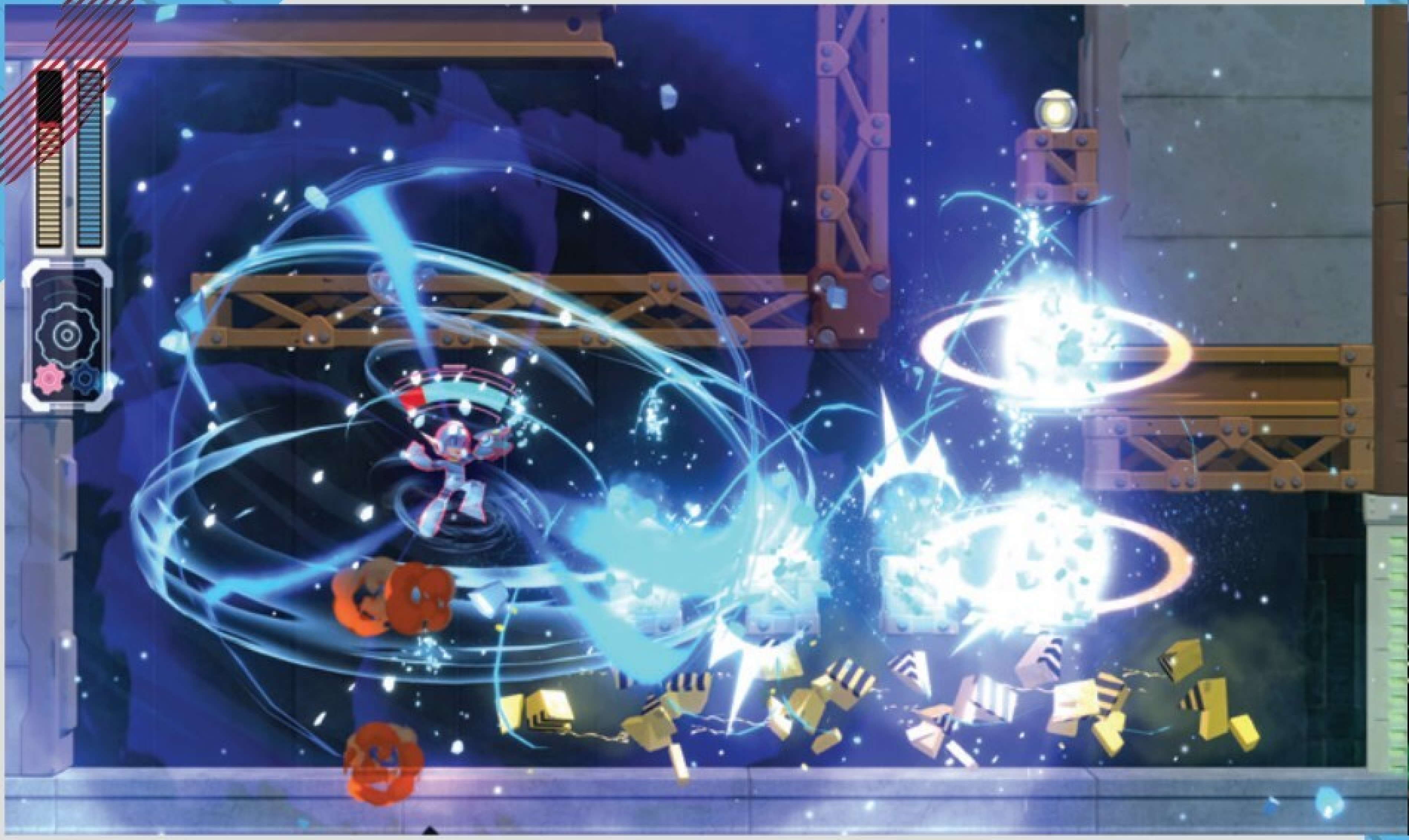




Designing a string of creative Robot Masters is no easy task, which is why Capcom once turned to its fans for help. Starting with Mega Man 2, Capcom held a recurring "Mega Man Boss Character Contest," which ran through Mega Man 8 on the PlayStation and even spilled over into the Mega Man Legends and Mega Man Battle Network series.

At its height, the contest was drawing in more than 200,000 fan submissions each year, but only eight could be selected and redesigned by Keiji Inafune for the final game. Contest winners would have their names featured in the game, and would receive prize packages that included T-shirts and other Mega Man merchandise featuring their character.

The contest was so popular that it drew the attention of Mega Man 11's art director Yuji Ishihara, who submitted three different boss robot designs for Mega Man 4's art contest: Crab Man, Bat Man, and Liquid Man. The catch was that Ishihara was already working for Capcom on games like Disney's Aladdin and The Magical Quest Starring Mickey Mouse. Since Ishihara thought he might get in trouble for entering the contest, he made up a pseudonym and secretly submitted his designs. Ishihara's entries were not chosen, but years later he was able to fulfil his dream of creating Mega Man characters while working on the Battle Network series and now Mega Man 11.



LIVING WEAPON MASTER

Capcom asked that we not talk about the Robot Master boss encounters, but players who overcome the pyramid-level boss gain his ability to create blocks that fall out of the sky. Like past Mega Man games, this ability is extremely useful against a specific Robot Master and some of its minions. Determining that optimal boss order has always been a hallmark of the series. However, in the past, the link between a Robot Master and its weakness could be tenuous.

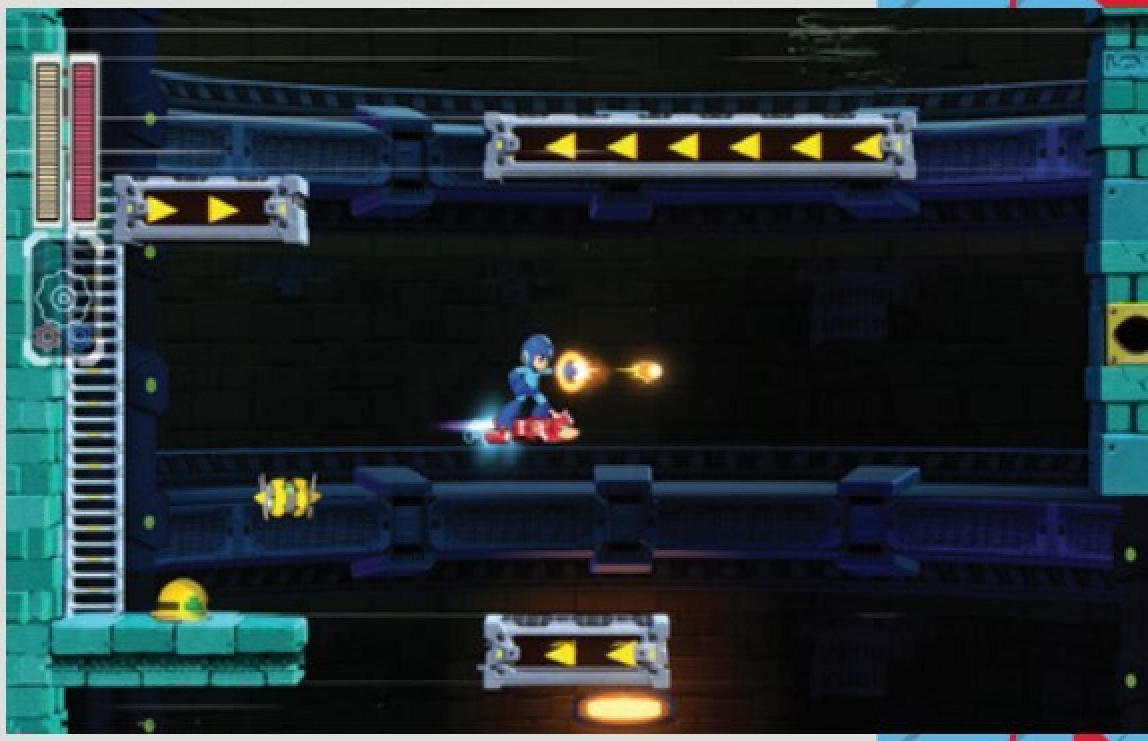
"If you look at the series and how it's evolved over time, I feel that the relationship between the weapons and the Robot Masters that are weak against each weapon had started to become a lot more difficult to discern," Tsuchiya says. "They made a lot less sense, and the further the mainline series progressed they became really difficult. We put more thought into how they link up this time around."

We test this falling-block attack by jumping into another level. This one features a construction theme. The boss in this stage is hibernating underground, and Mega Man must work through a massive construction site to get to him. Capcom says this level was actually inspired by real-life construction that happened in Capcom's offices during Mega Man 11's conception phase.

As we power through this stage, which is full of creaking girders and conveyor belts, we encounter a few of Mega Man's iconic enemies, such as the pickaxe-throwing Picket Man or the adorable walking hardhats known as Mets. Capcom says it has created a wide variety of new foes, but 30 percent of Mega Man 11's enemies are fan favorites.

Halfway through the stage we encounter a midboss – a massive excavator driven by a

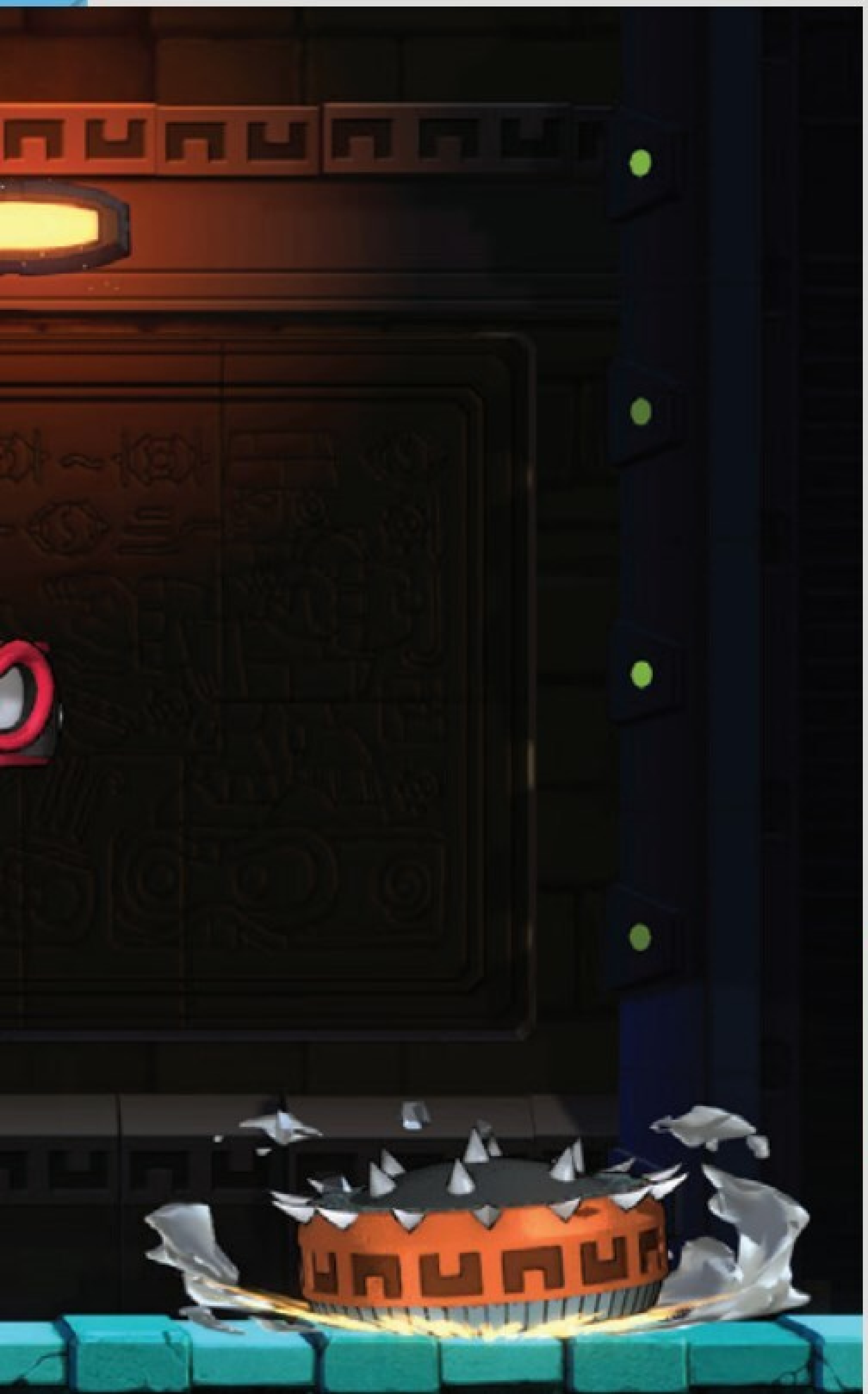
The studio is considering some new quality of life features, such as putting Mega Man's slide on a single button and allowing players to charge up their buster without holding down the attack button



Met. This giant digger shuffles forward with a series of spin attacks and then unleashes a round of construction cones that home in on Mega Man like heat-seeking missiles. While dodging this barrage, Mega Man must jump into the air and attack the driver's cabin, where the boss is weak. Fortunately, our new falling blocks come in handy. Charging up Mega Man's new attack generates a larger cascade of blocks, which allows us to send this dozer off to dreamland in no time.

After finishing the construction level, Mega Man earns his second Robot Master ability, a powerful physical attack that transforms Mega Man's fist into a jackhammer spike. Not only is this attack devastating, Capcom imagines that players will find this mid-air dash attack useful during platforming sequences. Capcom says it is trying to design multiple uses into all the Robot Master weapons. Thankfully, stringing together different Robot Master attacks is now quicker than ever thanks to the ability to flick the right analog stick to hot-swap between Mega Man's various weapons, kind of like an invisible weapon wheel.

Little details like these are what gave the Mega Man series its longevity in the first place. Mega Man has always featured creative enemy design, tight controls, and a difficulty that walks a fine line between invigorating and infuriating. Based on everything we've seen so far, Mega Man 11 feels like the true sequel fans thought they may never get to see.



READY TO ROCK

Mega Man was once one of the biggest icons in gaming, but in recent years he's felt like a forgotten figure. The biggest release to feature Mega Man in the last seven years was 2014's Super Smash Bros. for the 3DS and Wii U. Sadly, the only new Mega Man content fans have received in more than half a decade was an all-star fighting game developed by another publisher. This has led many Mega Man fans to feel like Capcom was ignoring the little blue robot that helped put it on the map. Thankfully, this is no longer the case.

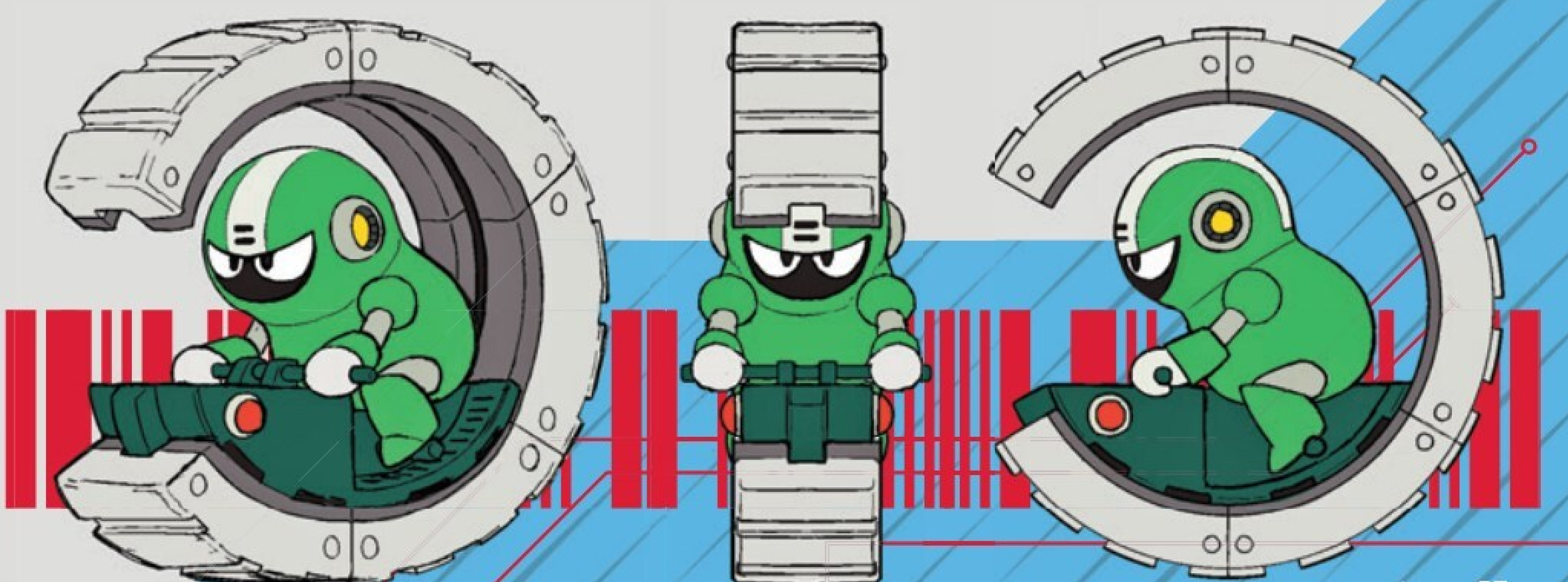
"When Inafune-san was still our boss he said, 'Don't let brands stagnate. Always keep moving forward,'" says Mega Man 11 producer Kazuhiro Tsuchiya. "Yes, we did have a seven-year absence, but it doesn't mean that we stayed still. We were always moving forward and trying to figure out what to do next."

Capcom hasn't abandoned Mega Man. However, this means that Capcom now faces a task that has crippled lesser studios: Can it deliver a new experience that satisfies the desires of old fans while drawing in a younger generation?

"This is definitely not just a trial balloon, we're definitely not experimenting," Tsuchiya says. "We don't even have the bandwidth to experiment. This is about pouring everything we have and everything we know into one project and making it happen. We're using our prior experience and knowledge to strengthen ourselves and reach the next level. From the start of the project I've been saying, 'Mega Man 11 needs to be a true resurrection of the franchise.'"

In other words, Capcom is climbing over its corpse to bring back Mega Man.

Head to gameinformer.com/megaman for a month's worth of exclusive Mega Man 11 content, including concept art, a tour of the audio department, and other interviews with the development team

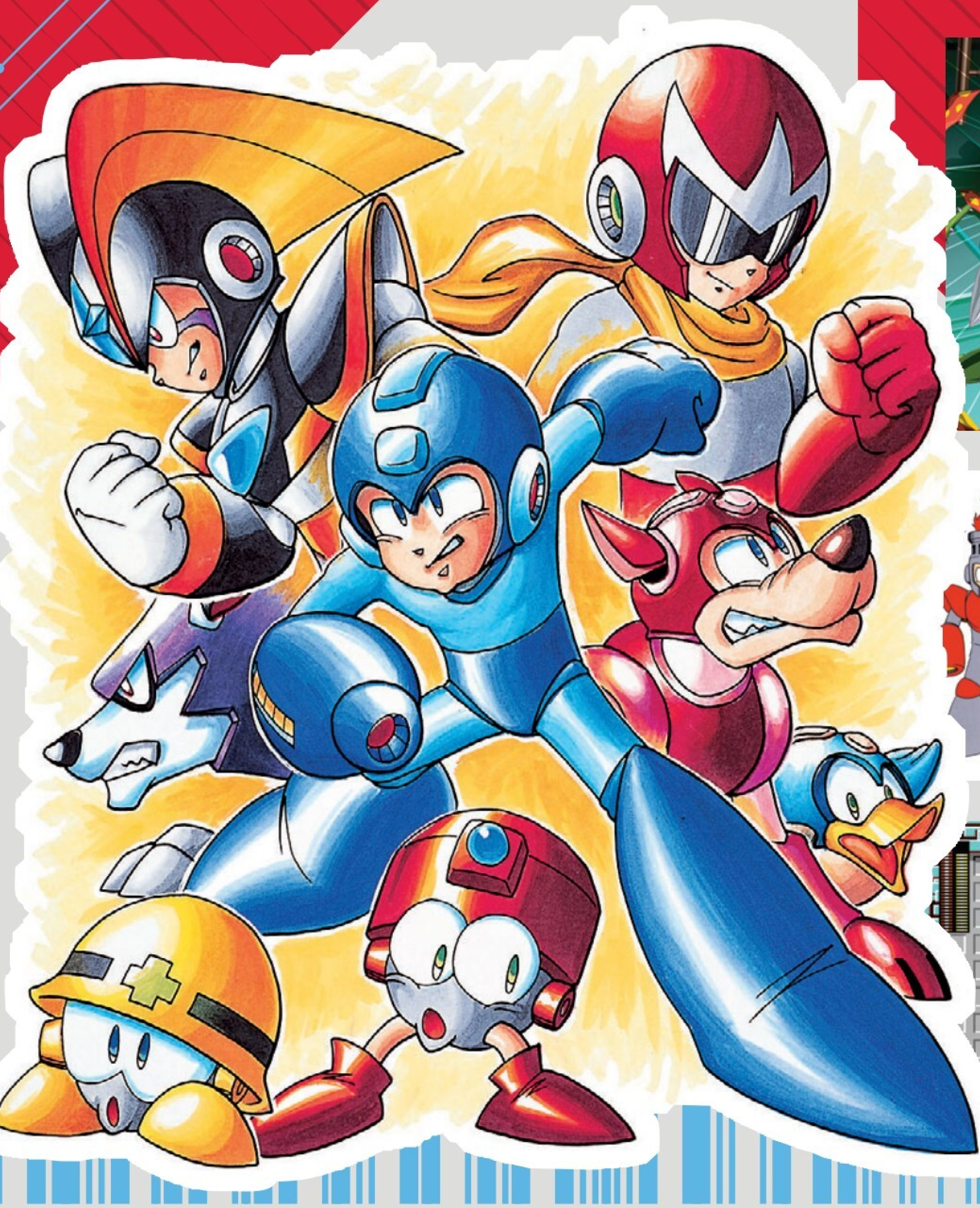


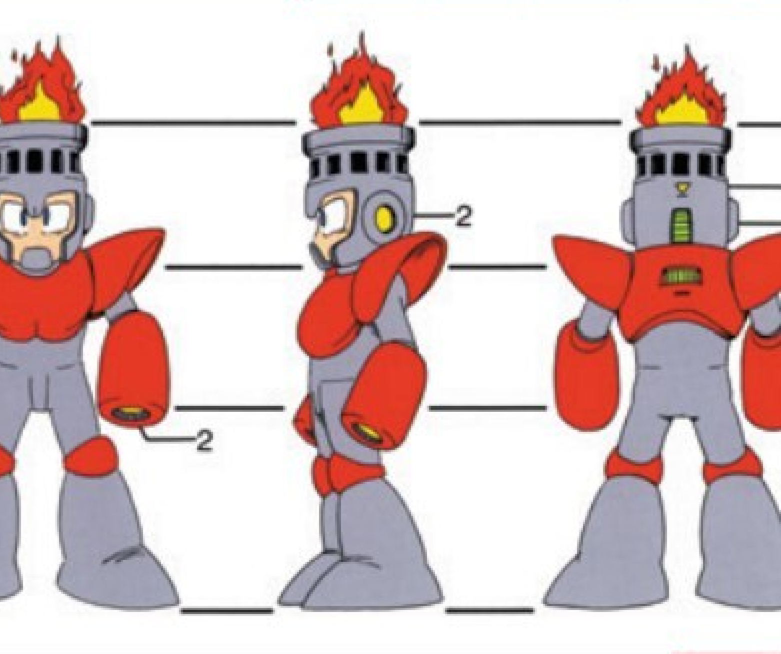
SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING BLUE

We celebrate Mega Man's 30th anniversary by examining his origins

Before Street Fighter II, Resident Evil, or Monster Hunter, Capcom was defined by one tiny blue robot. Mega Man's mix of excellent level design, colorful characters, inventive weapons, and fine-tuned difficulty allowed it to stand out from other platformers on the NES and helped the blue bomber build a legacy that is more than 100 games strong. For Mega Man's 30th anniversary we look back at how Capcom built one of the industry's most endearing icons.

BY BEN REEVES





Mega Man
0184300

BUILT FOR CONSOLES

In the late ’70s and early ’80s, Capcom was a computer and technology company that had achieved moderate success in the arcade industry. By 1987, Capcom could sense industry trends were shifting toward gaming consoles, so the company put together a team of six game designers and tasked them with developing a game for consoles that could compete with popular titles of the era like Super Mario Bros., Contra, and Castlevania.

An introspective designer named Akira Kitamura led this charge to create an action game originally intended to be based on the popular manga character, Astro Boy. However, when Capcom’s licensing deal fell through, Kitamura was forced to design his own characters from scratch. Kitamura began sketching concepts for a series of robots that might be a good fit for a side-scrolling shooter.

Initially, Kitamura felt that Capcom’s new game would be a frantic run-and-gun shooter, with a feel similar to Capcom’s earlier arcade hits like Commando and 1942. However, the project’s programmer was so meticulous that he insisted on implementing several internal safety checks into the game’s code. This created a sturdy codebase with few bugs, but it also meant that the NES couldn’t process the game as quickly as most shooters. As a result, Kitamura realized they would have to design a slower action game – maybe something like a platformer.

Kitamura gave his robot designs to one of the company’s new hires, a young artist named the Keiji Inafune, and asked him rework them for game and design minions for this hero to battle. One unexpected benefit of designing a slower game was that the team had more computational resources to devote to their main character, so Inafune put them to use. Kitamura’s initial designs featured a white robot, but since the NES had a greater spectrum of blue hues, Inafune felt that they could create a better-looking protagonist if they used a couple different shades of blue.

“We tried hard to make Mega Man come to life,” Inafune told *Game Informer* in 2013. “We wanted to make him look alive, so that the user could really feel attached to the character and see Mega Man as a friend. Back in the day, there was limited game capacity, and we had to really be creative to squeeze everything into the cartridge. So we fought to be creative and made it to show the bullets shoot from the arm, the eyes blinking, and the body ducking before each run.”

Mega Man 10

FINDING A FORMULA

As the main character started to take shape, so did the basic game mechanics. The team came up with a rock-paper-scissors mechanic where their main robot would steal weapons from boss enemies and use them against other robots who were weak against certain weapon types.

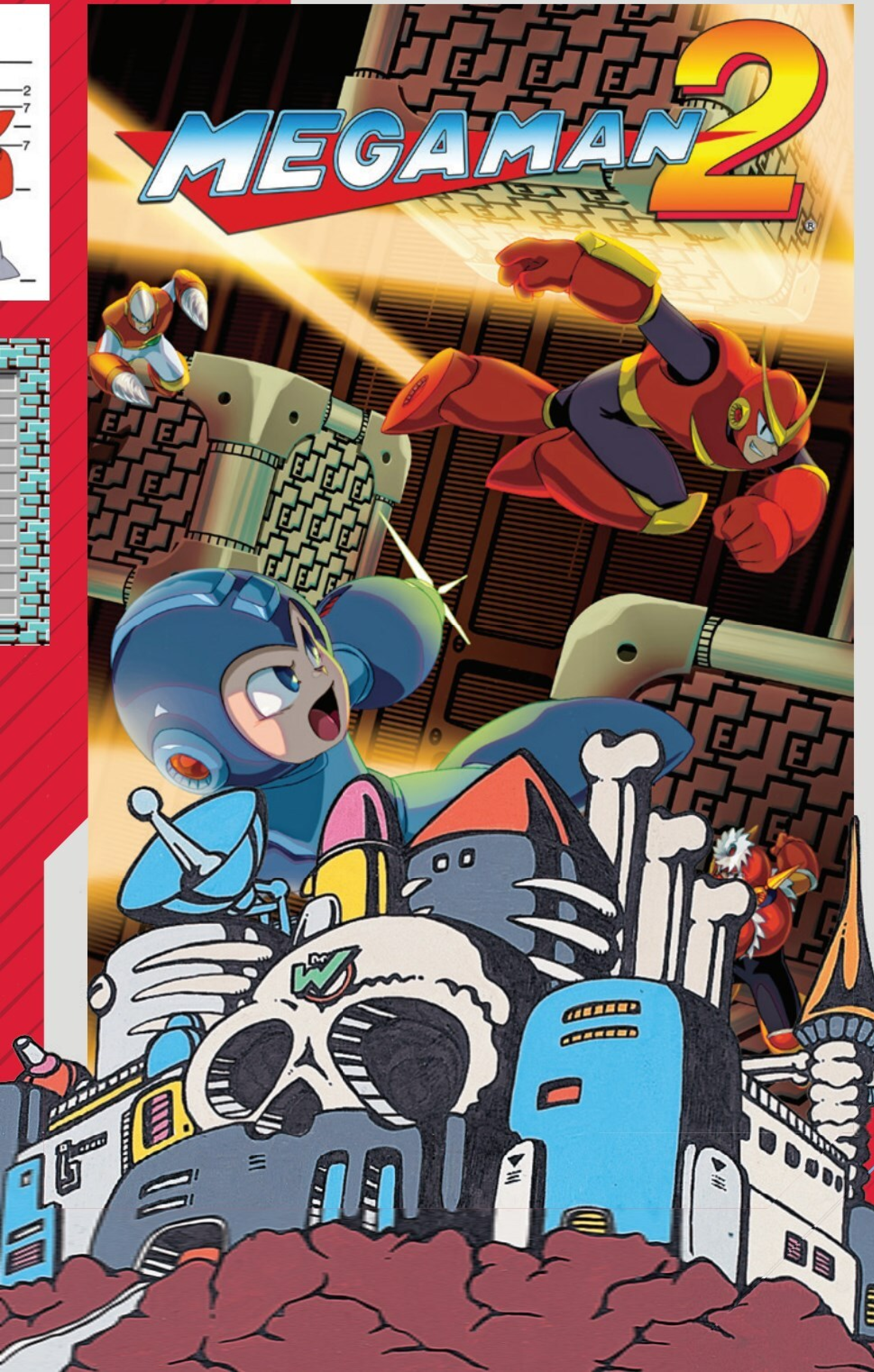
"The number one thing I wanted to do in Mega Man was to make the different weapons interact more with the enemies and the backgrounds," Kitamura said in an interview for the manga collection *Rockman Maniax* in 2011. "Enemies, special walls, the clouds, the trees, all of them would be alterable by the weapons, sometimes helping, sometimes hindering the player. I wanted the bosses to have different reactions depending on the weapon you used – shooting a boss with a certain weapon could make him get bigger and bigger, or cause him to divide and multiply, or get more HP."

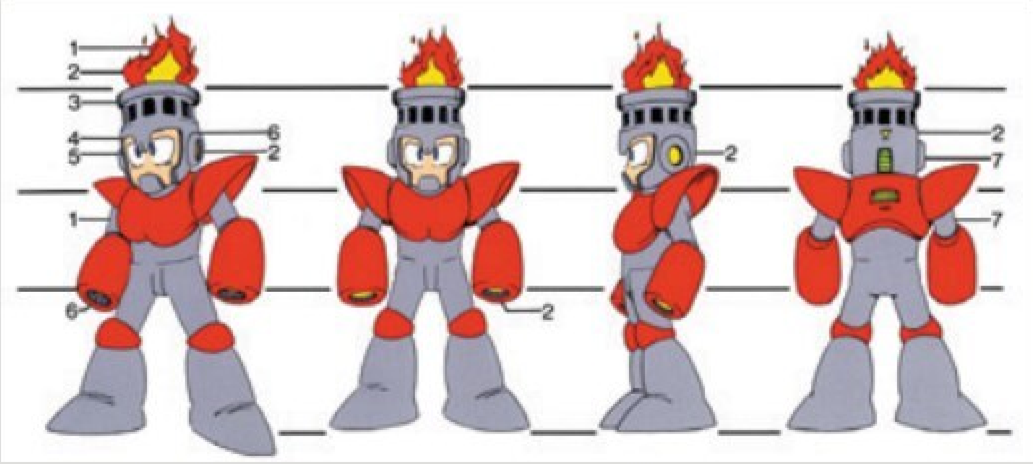
Unfortunately, hardware restrictions forced the team to pare back this design until their hero's various weapons only had different effects when used against each boss. This feature was still wildly inventive for the day. After the team coupled this weapon-stealing system with the fact that players could choose the order in which they tackled each stage, they started to feel like they had something special on their hands.

Still, Kitamura wasn't done. He began obsessing over game difficulty, and would play other difficult games over and over again, trying to analyze and perfect a formula for addictive gameplay. He figured that part of the formula included game length. Kitamura wanted to ensure that each stage was fun to replay and could be finished in about an hour, so he would measure off each level by walking through them and timing himself.

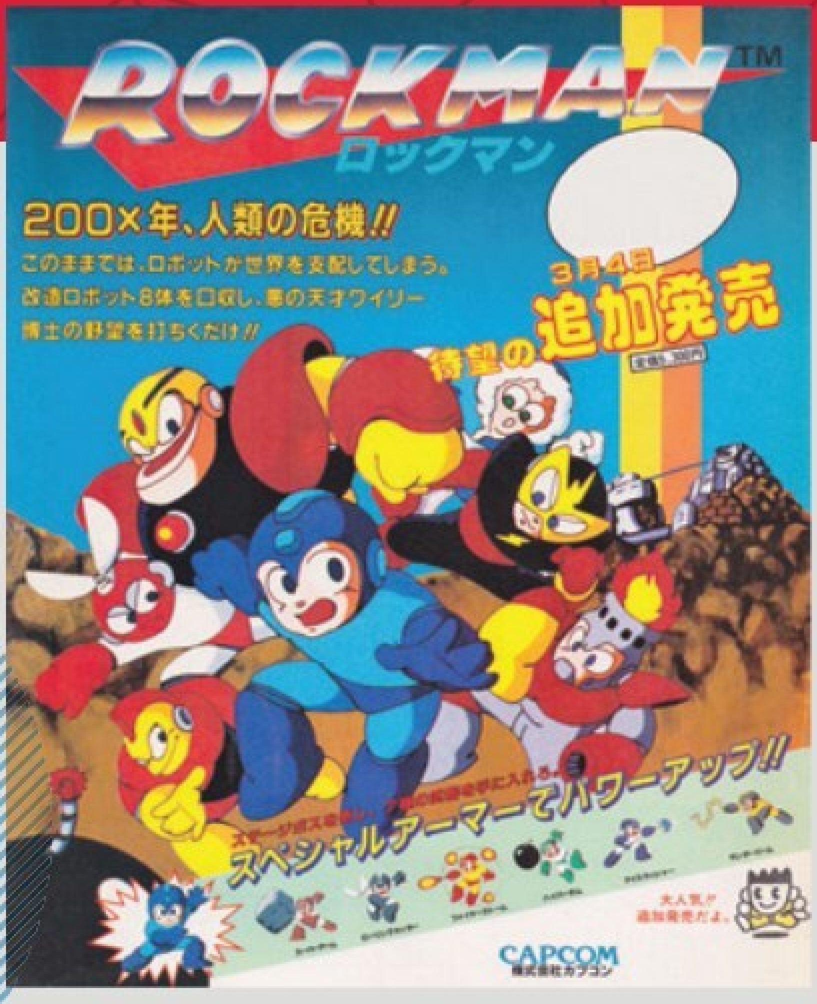
Another big component to Kitamura's formula was enemy behavior. He determined that enemies needed to behave in consistent but sometimes unpredictable ways. Therefore, single, weaker enemies would appear in waves of three or four. Each enemy in a wave would use the same attack, but the difficulty of each enemy in the wave would gradually rise until the last enemy, which would be easier. The thinking behind this was to leave players with a softer impression of the difficulty. Kitamura reasoned that people were more likely to return to a game that was hard but seemed beatable. If the last enemy in a wave was the easiest to beat, then players would feel like they were learning and getting better at the game.

It's debatable if this was the perfect solution for addictive gameplay, but as the team playtested their game, they felt like they had found a fun formula. The only thing they needed now was a name.





Mega Man 8


ROCKMAN™
ロックマン
200×年、人類の危機!!
このままでは、ロボットが世界を支配してしまう。
改造ロボット8体を回収し、悪の天才ワイリー
博士の野望を打ちくだけ!!
3月4日
待望の追加発売
スペシャルアーマーでパワーアップ!!
CAPCOM

The original Mega Man didn't offer players a detailed narrative. In fact, the U.S. instruction book referred to Mega Man's creator as Dr. Wright and called Mega Man's hometown "Monsteropolis." These details are no longer considered canon.

Throughout the rest of the NES' lifespan, Capcom built a Mega Man narrative that plays with heavy philosophical themes that many casual fans may have missed. In the official lore, Dr. Light is a brilliant scientist who creates sentient, artificial lifeforms. The scientist uses this historic breakthrough to design a series of industrial robots that all have their own specialized tasks.

Dr. Light's first creation is a robot known as Proto Man [Blues in Japan] who is designed as a prototype for future robots. While Dr. Light's achievement is exceptional, the scientist discovers a critical problem with Proto Man's power reactor. Before the doctor can fix the faulty reactor, Proto Man runs away, fearing he will lose his identity if any part of him is replaced.

After this, Dr. Light creates a household robot named Mega. Unlike other robots, Mega is imbued with the ability to turn himself off. This grants Mega Man with a special level of autonomy and places Mega Man above other robots. This autonomy is an honor as well as a burden. While other robots were made for a specific job and can be controlled, Mega Man is free to make his own judgments, and must find purpose in life through the choices he makes.

Mega Man's focus on action means Capcom rarely digs deeper into these philosophical dilemmas, but existential concepts about "what makes a person," help color the fiction and remain an important component of the series.

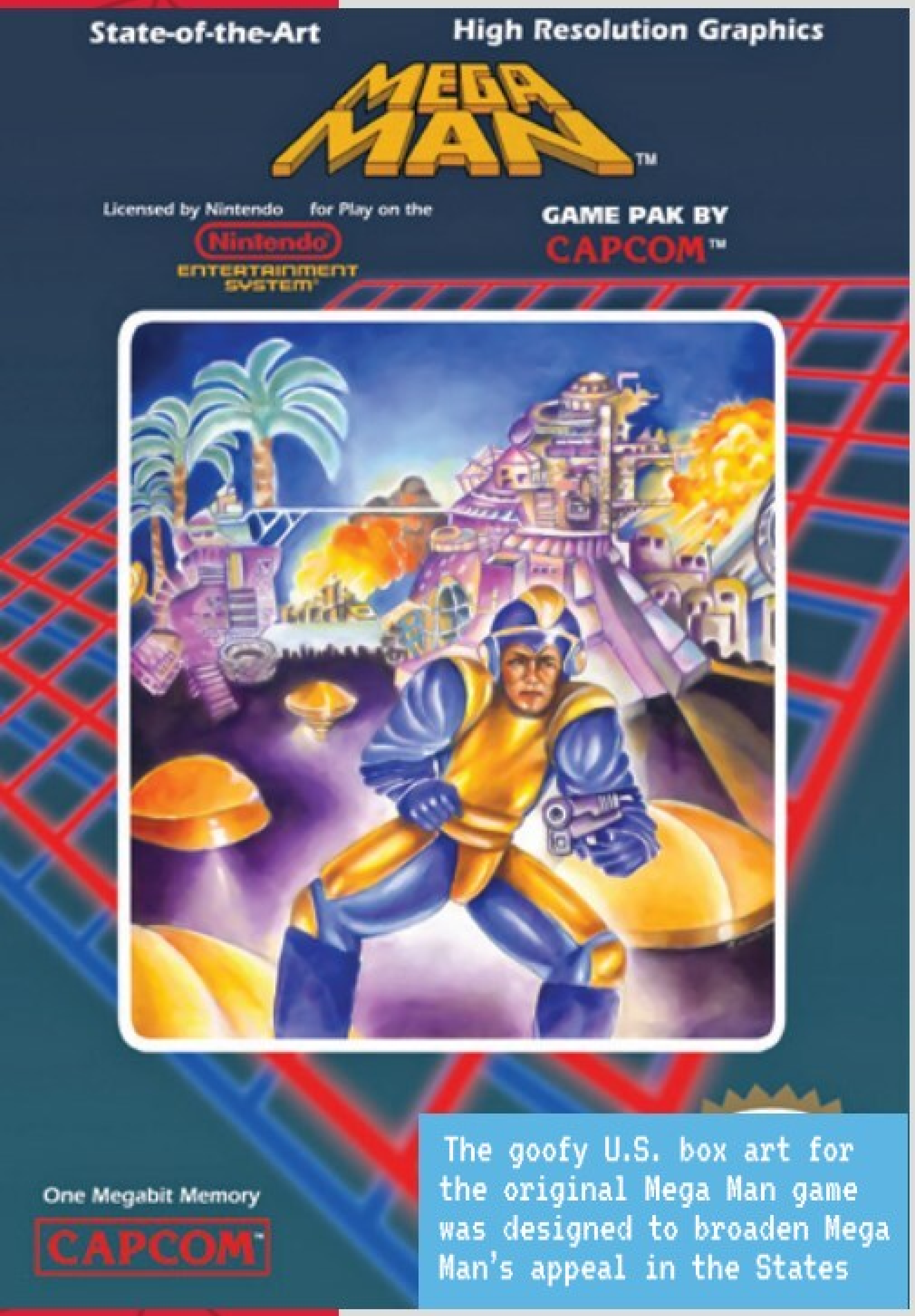
STARTING AT ROCK BOTTOM

Capcom had been kicking around names for a long time, but none of them felt right. Titles like Battle Kid, Mighty Kid, and Knuckle Kid were all considered, but they failed to communicate what the game was about. Since Capcom's new game was about stealing other robot's weapons, like a game of rock, paper, scissors, and since the main robot rotated through a rainbow of colors as he changed weapons, the team gravitated toward the title Battle Rainbow Rockman. However, that title was deemed too long and was eventually shortened to Rockman.

While the Japanese still know Capcom's little blue robot as Rockman, when he came to the States, he was significantly rebranded. Capcom of America's senior vice president Joseph Marici thought the name Rockman was nonsensical and pushed to change the title to Mega Man. The U.S. team also wanted to make Mega Man seem less cute in hopes that he would have a greater shelf appeal, so they commissioned new box art. This rush job resulted in one of the most notoriously bad box covers in history; the character on the front looks nothing like the adorable blue hero in the game.

Capcom's Japanese offices blamed the U.S. box art for the game's poor sales, but Mega Man's first game didn't make waves on either side of the Pacific. Fortunately, Capcom was willing to give Kitamura and his team another chance, but it wasn't willing to commit a lot of resources to another project. Therefore, the Mega Man team was given only three months to make a sequel – an incredibly short deadline even for the late '80s.

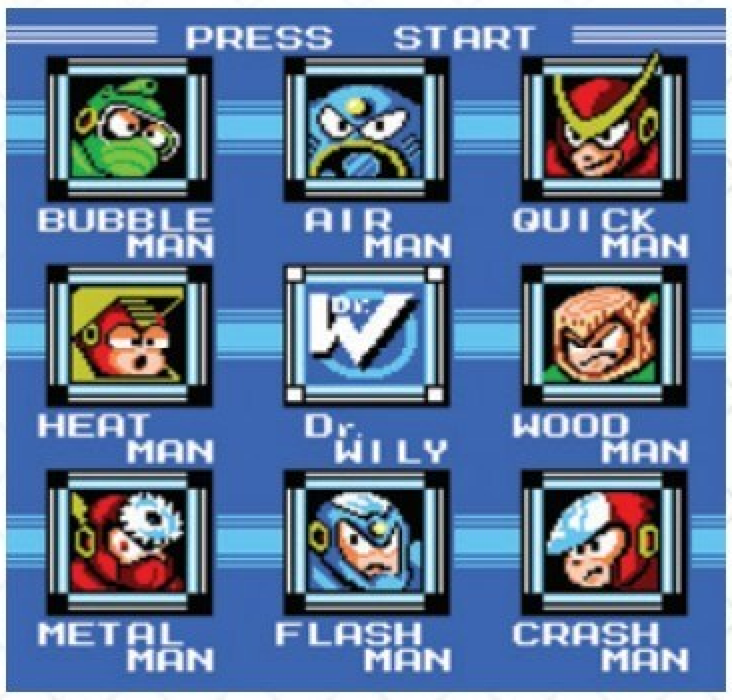
Despite the time crunch, Kitamura's team knocked it out of the park the second time around. The team polished the action, found a better difficulty balance, and created even more Robot Masters. The original Mega Man featured only six robot bosses, but Mega Man 2 upped the total to eight, which became the series standard. While the original Mega Man had established the series' formula, Mega Man 2 fine-tuned that



The goofy U.S. box art for the original Mega Man game was designed to broaden Mega Man's appeal in the States

Mega Man 7

Designing Weapons



It may seem like Capcom drew gimmicks out of a hat when creating Robot Masters, but Mega Man's creators put a lot of thought into how each weapon works and how Mega Man can use them during boss battles. The weakness for some Robot Masters is obvious. For example, it makes sense that Fire Man is vulnerable to an attack called Ice Slasher. But, why would an electric robot like Elec Man be weak to scissors?

Early on, Capcom built clues into each robot's attack pattern that could cue players into that master's weakness. For example, Metal Man from Mega Man 2 counterattacks whenever players press the attack at close range. However, the quick boomerang has a range that is just outside Metal Man's detection, and it is the only weapon in the game that will continually fire if players hold down the button. These details are intended to cue observant players to the fact that quick boomerang is the best choice for that battle.

design to the point that people took notice.

The difference was apparent in the sales, too. Mega Man 2 sold more than a million copies. Capcom immediately greenlit a sequel, but Kitamura was out this time around since he had left Capcom shortly after the release of Mega Man 2. The third game in the series was given a new director. This new director left the project halfway through development for reasons that are still unknown, which left Capcom in a lurch until character artist Keiji Inafune stepped up to the plate.

"The reason I [say Mega Man 3] is my least favorite wasn't because of gameplay or that I didn't like the game, but it was mainly because of just what was behind the release of the game," Inafune told *Nintendo Power* in 2007. "For example, I was forced to put the game out before I thought it was ready, and we lost the main planner along the way, so I had to basically fill in that role to finish the game. I thought that we needed more time, and we had two months to finish the final 50 percent of the game."

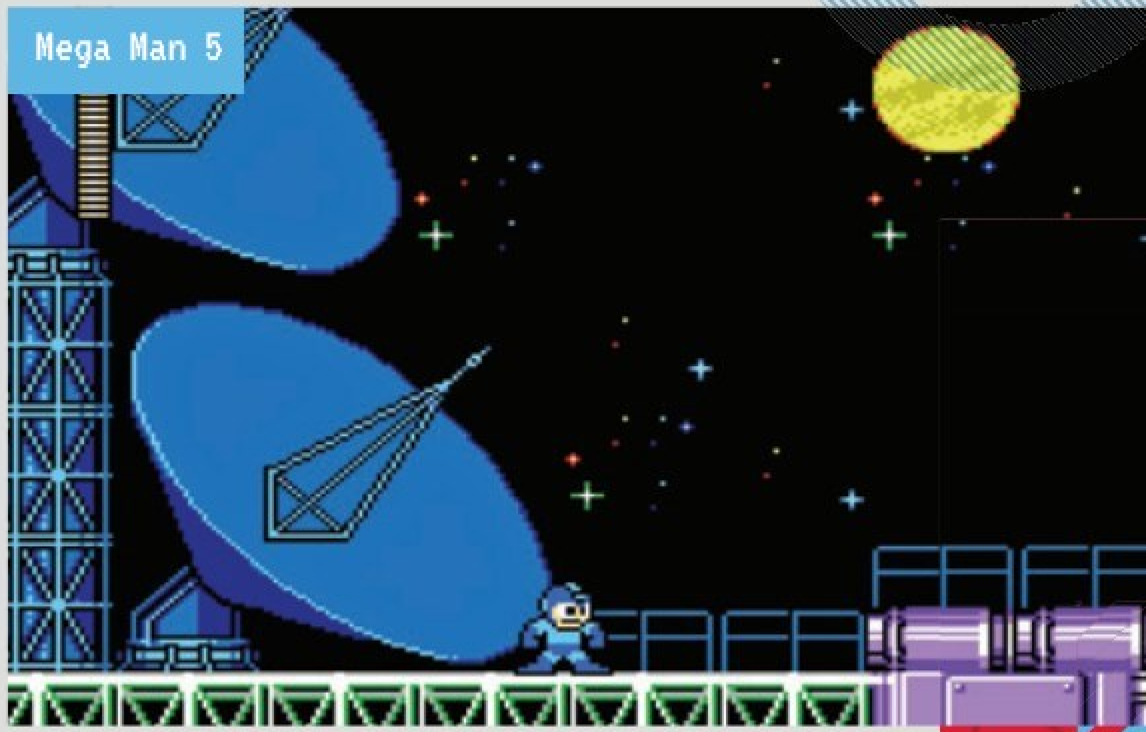
Fortunately for Capcom, Inafune was the right man for that job. Over the course of the next 20 years, Inafune would shape nearly every Mega Man project and help take this little blue weapon stealer to new heights.

TAKING OVER THE BIG BLUE WORLD

By the early '90s, gamers around the world had fallen in love with Mega Man, and Capcom was happy to deliver new adventures – pumping out six Mega Man titles on the NES alone, three of which came out after the SNES had hit shelves.

As the console generations wore on, Mega Man evolved with them. Spin-off series like Mega Man X explored a darker, slightly more mature future. The Mega Man Legends games let fans explore a fully 3D world. And the Mega Man Battle Network series had the blue bomber experiment with tactical-RPG combat. However, while these various spinoffs explored new mechanics, Mega Man's mainline series remained surprisingly true to the original formula, which speaks to the creative genius of those early games.

Mega Man was Capcom's first original creation for consoles, and his success gave the company leverage to become a major player in the game industry. Over the last three decades, Mega Man has given us a series of thrilling adventures; he's blasted his way through a seemingly endless stream of Robot Masters and tried on an entire spectrum of color combinations. He's worked his way into Saturday morning cartoon lineups and toy shelves. He's become a classic gaming icon that stands next to giants like Pac-Man and Mario. Mega Man's white-knuckle gameplay and precise platforming have thrilled us for 30 years. We can't wait for 30 more.



Mega Man 5

Ghost Of Tsushima

A samurai adventure embraces open world

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Sucker Punch Productions

» Release
TBA

Modern open-world games have transported us to prehistoric pasts, post-apocalyptic futures, and dozens of historical eras in between. But one giant glaring hole exists in this timeline that seems like a natural fit for action games: feudal Japan. Sucker Punch Productions realized this when entertaining upwards of 70 game pitches during the studio's brainstorming process for conceiving its first title outside the Infamous franchise since 2009. Once the team landed on the samurai concept, they saw so many great possibilities.

"Seriously, how come no one has made a sprawling samurai open-world game yet?," game director Nate Fox said in a PlayStation blog. "Feudal Japan is beautiful; from the swaying bamboo forests to the ornate castles, it's a place that demands to be explored. Don't you want to wear a suit of samurai armor? Wouldn't you like to fire a six-foot-tall samurai long bow? Want to journey across a lush countryside with a katana on your hip? For me, the answer is clearly 'yes, yes please.'"

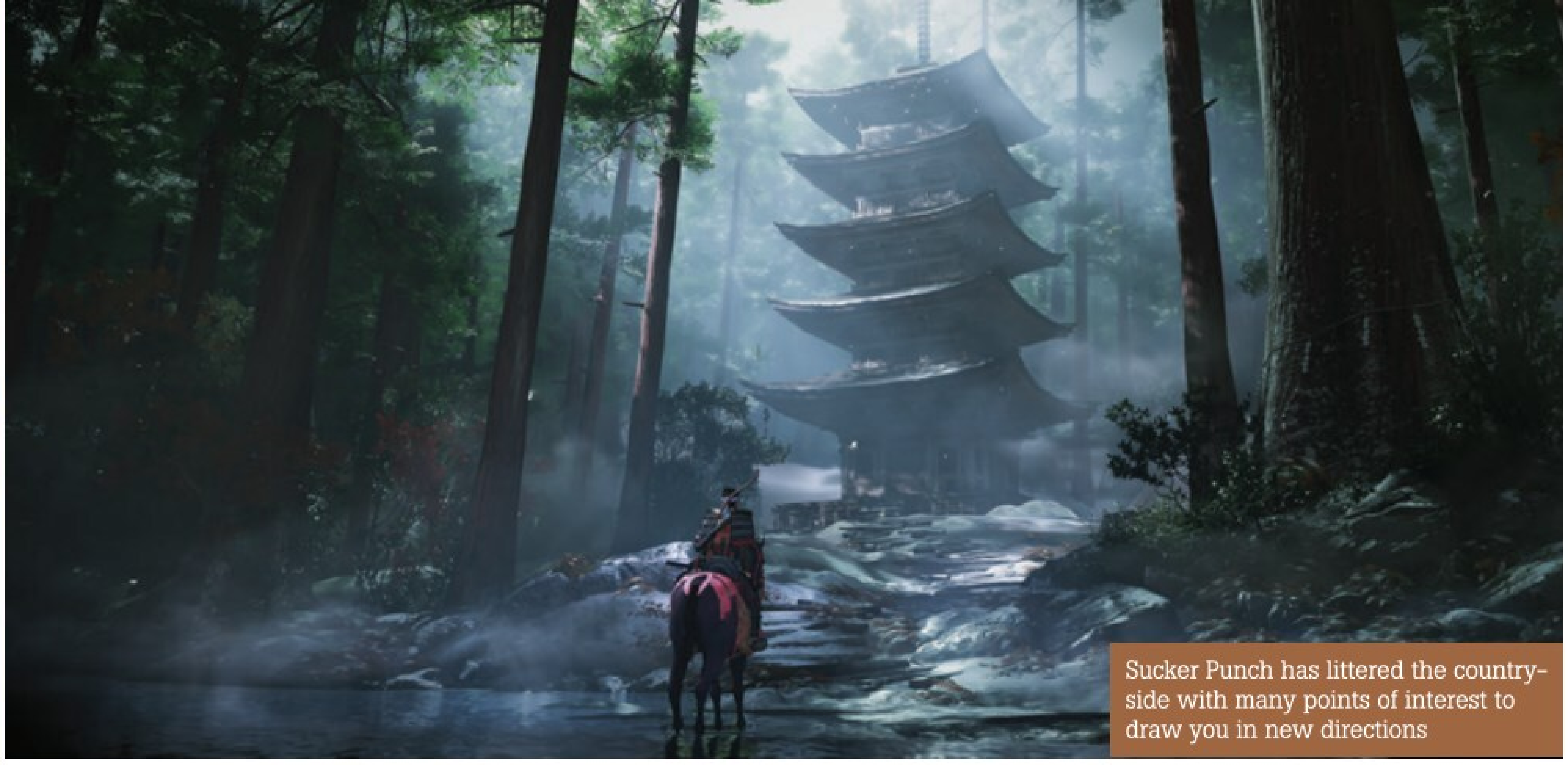
Thus, Ghost of Tsushima was born.

Sucker Punch debuted the game during Paris Games Week this past October, and while the hype trailer didn't reveal much beyond broad strokes about the gameplay or story, the gorgeous visuals and somber tone piqued our interest.

Ghost of Tsushima takes place during a Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274, the first of two attempts to conquer the island nation led by Kublai Khan. Situated halfway between the recently conquered Goryeo (Korea) and Japan, Tsushima Island is the unfortunate first stop for the war-hungry Mongols. Players take the role of a samurai named Jin, one of the warriors tasked with repelling the invasion. Their early efforts failed to impede Khan's progress and Jin therefore must adopt new tactics while "fighting back against overwhelming odds."

Historical records show the Mongol forces successfully subjugated the island, and the Mongols delved deeper into Japan before eventually being repelled after a timely typhoon destroyed much of its fleet. The Japanese refer to that storm as the "divine wind," or kamikaze, the birth of that infamous term. Sucker Punch hasn't revealed if the game expands beyond Tsushima and onto other islands, but given the real-world events, it's a possibility.

You play as Jin, one of the samurai warriors tasked with repelling the Mongol invasion

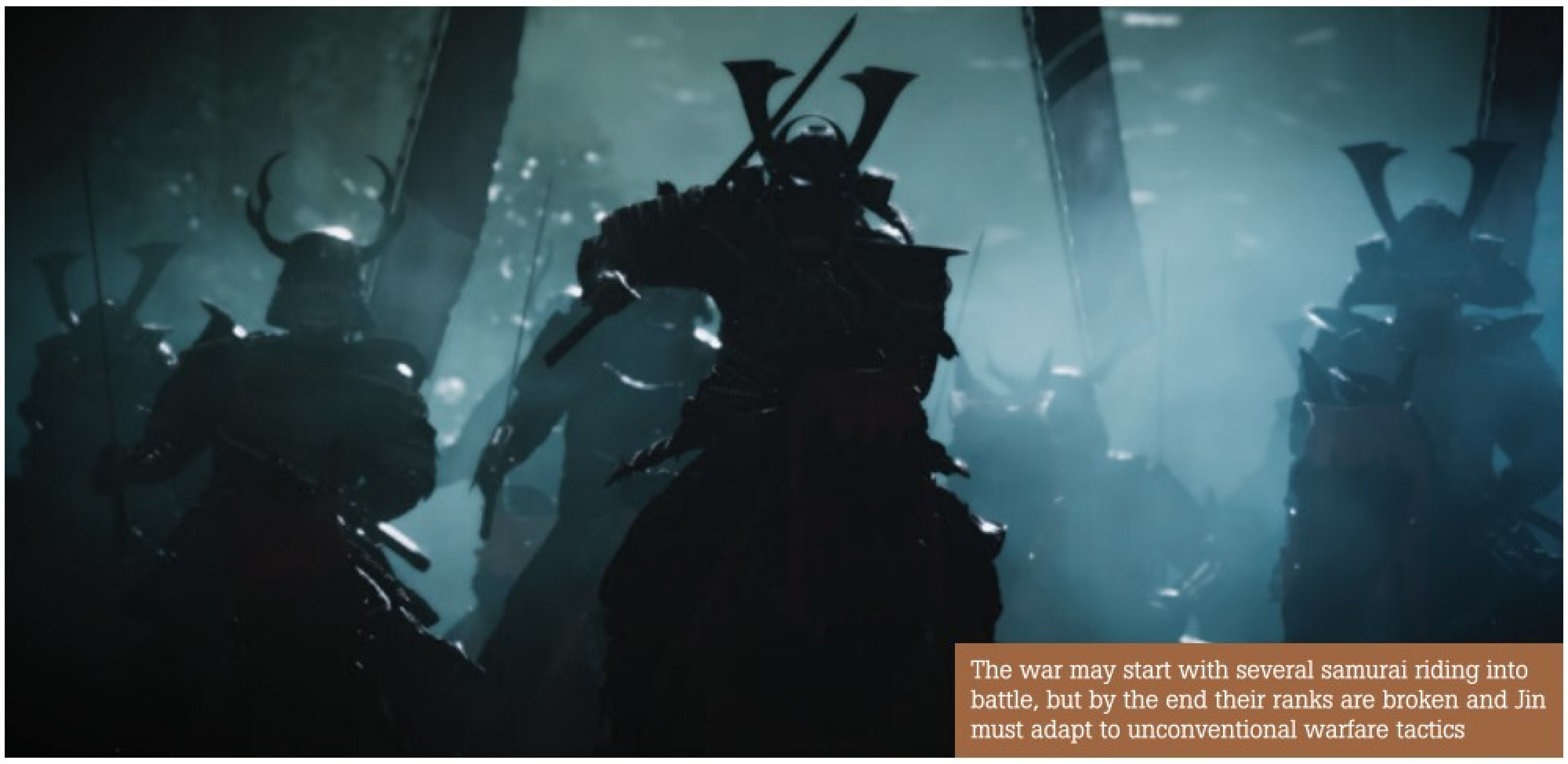


Sucker Punch has littered the countryside with many points of interest to draw you in new directions

This era's rich history gives Sucker Punch a lot to work with. The adoption of Zen practices into the samurai tradition, roving Wokou pirates marauding the coastlines, and the birth of the katana blade (which were made because traditional swords had a habit of getting stuck in Mongol armor) all happened around the game's time period. The Mongol Empire was known for its ambition and ferociousness, but Kublai Khan was also a scholar and patron of the arts, giving Sucker Punch an interesting character to explore should he take a central role in the narrative.

Ghost of Tsushima's open world is filled with different places to explore, towns to visit, and people to meet. Sucker Punch believes the beautiful and exotic settings will beckon players to pick a direction and wander, so the studio isn't littering the map with waypoints to guide players. The game has been in development for more than three years, and the technological progress the studio has made in that time is evident. Sucker Punch says all the footage used in the trailer was recorded directly from the game engine.

We still have much to learn about Ghost of Tsushima's story, open world, and stealth action gameplay mechanics. Keep your eyes open during December's PSX, when Sucker Punch promises to reveal more about its samurai adventure. » **Matt Bertz**



The war may start with several samurai riding into battle, but by the end their ranks are broken and Jin must adapt to unconventional warfare tactics

Overwatch

A new hero and a magnificent new map head Overwatch's way

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
12-Player Online Shooter

» Publisher
Blizzard Entertainment

» Developer
Blizzard Entertainment

» Release
TBA

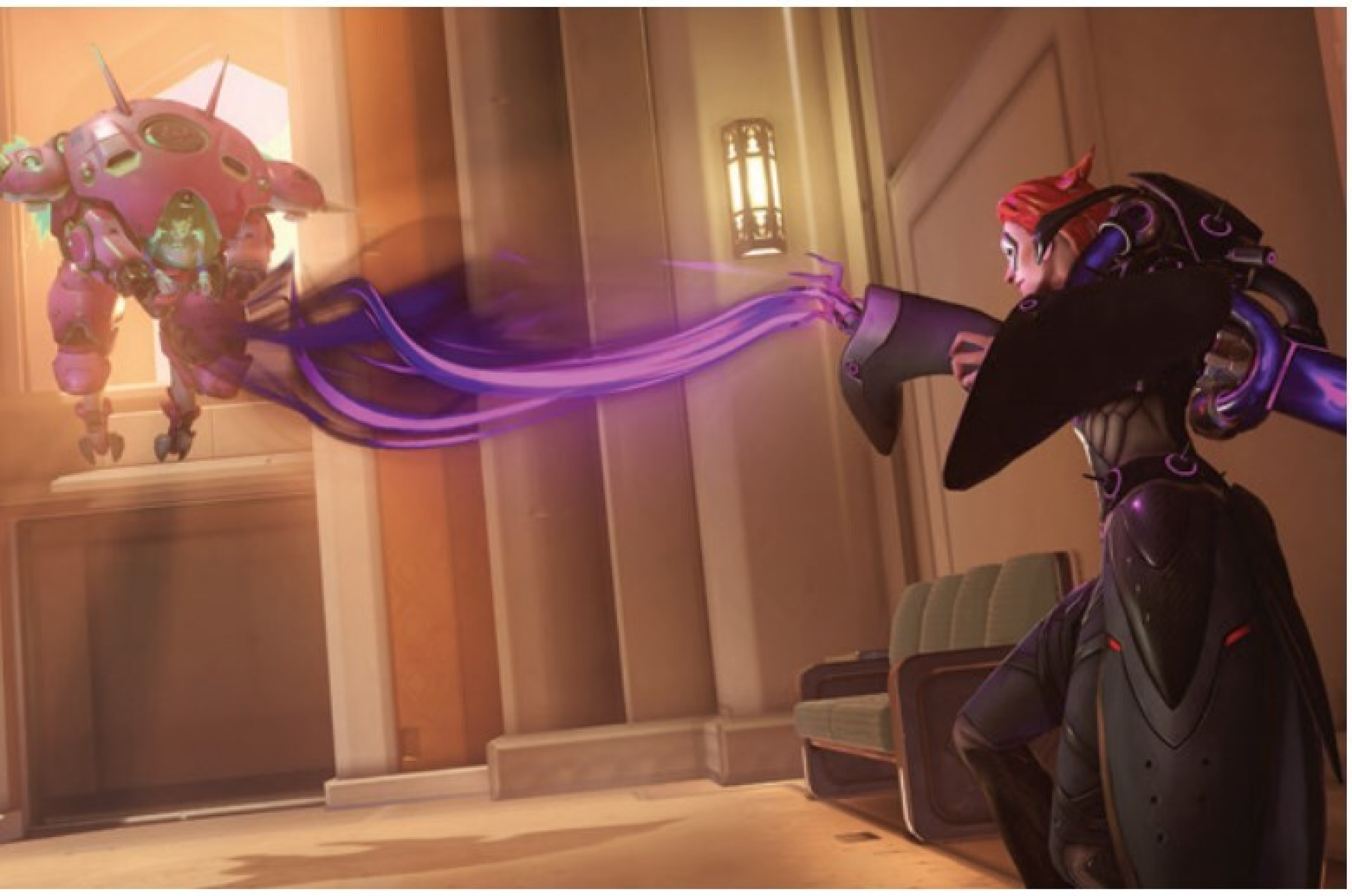
Blizzard continues to support Overwatch heading into 2018 with a double whammy of content. New character Moira offers a bold new support option for players to embrace, and the Blizzard World map celebrates all of the company's popular franchises in a wonderfully campy fashion.

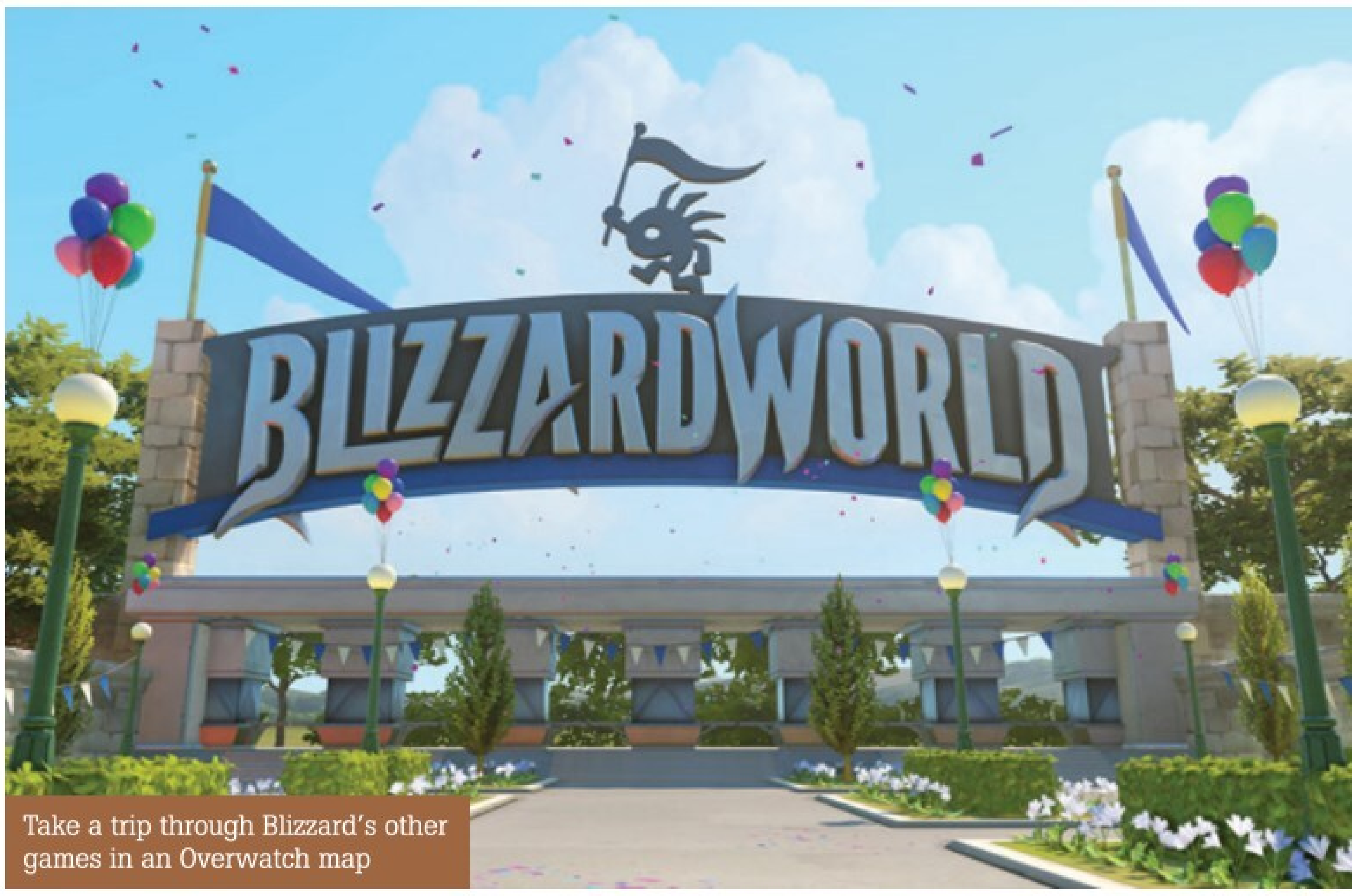
Moira is an absolute blast to play, and perhaps more importantly, may get more players who don't play a support role interested in the critical task of assisting their team. I typically gravitate toward offense-oriented characters and don't really get excited about healing teammates, but Moira changed that.

Moira's skills are built around a "hurt to heal" concept, where you can charge your healing power up by blasting enemies with dark energy. Your options in any given situation represent an interesting duality. Moira's "bouncy ball," which is amazing in enclosed spaces, can be fired off as either a healing ball for allies or a doom ball for your enemies. Either way, it's a lot of satisfying fun in a packed room or as a corridor cleaner.

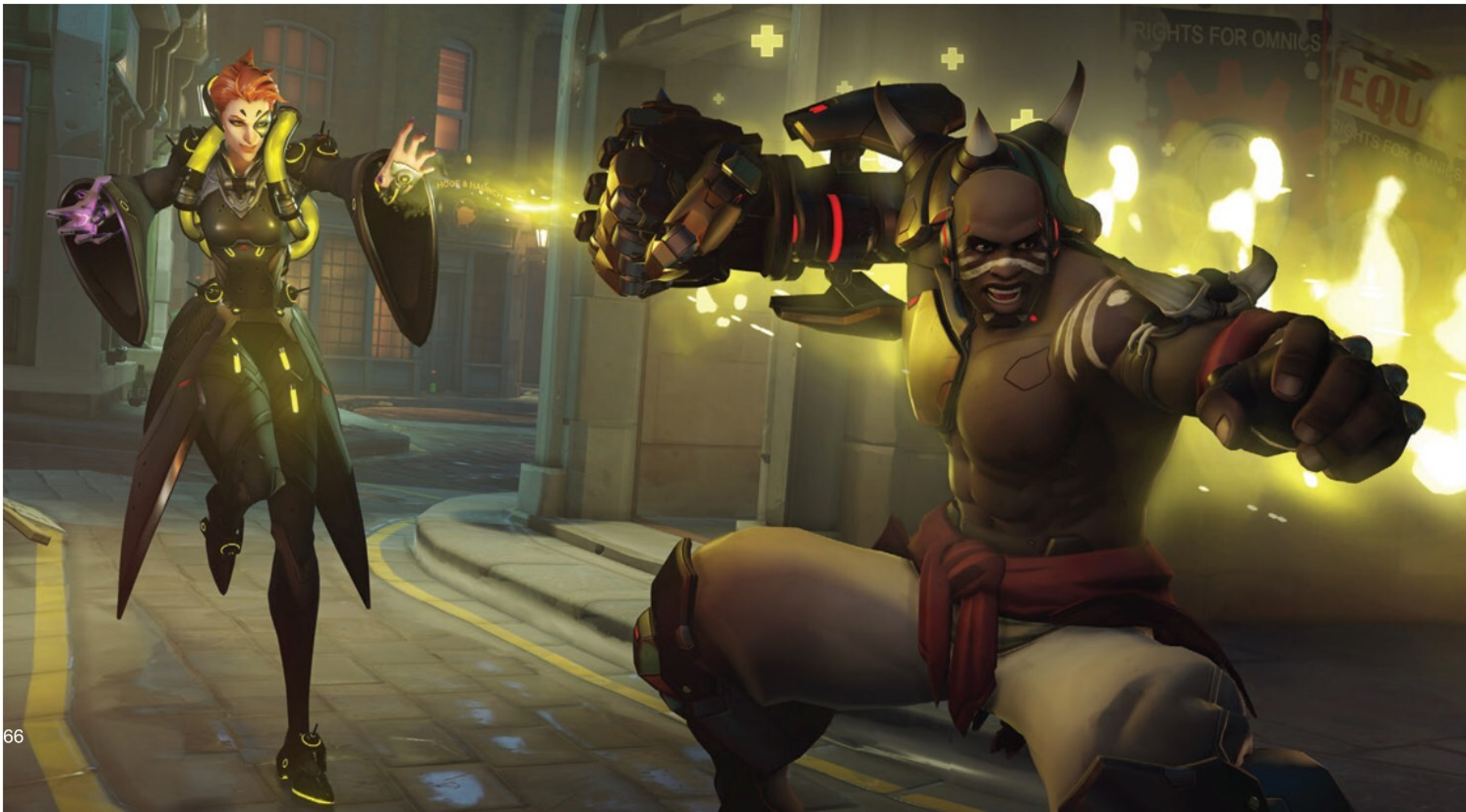
Not only is Moira constantly dishing out damage and handing out heals, but her ultimate ability lets her crush a choke point or shielded defensive position with a massive beam that heals all allies and damages all opponents caught in its path. Her escape potential is also huge, as she goes invisible and invulnerable as she fades away from the action only to reappear.

Something to look forward to is Blizzard World – a theme park map I wish existed in the real world. Players traverse various attractions, rides, arcades, and restaurants, all themed from other Blizzard games. While this is sort of the thing that Heroes of the Storm specializes in, it doesn't feel out of place here. Big-time Blizzard fans will get the most out of the Warcraft, StarCraft, Diablo, and yes, even Lost Vikings references. Attention to detail is huge in Blizzard World, with shifting atmospheres around each environment (the Diablo area is decidedly dark) and





Take a trip through Blizzard's other games in an Overwatch map



a smattering of interactive Easter eggs.

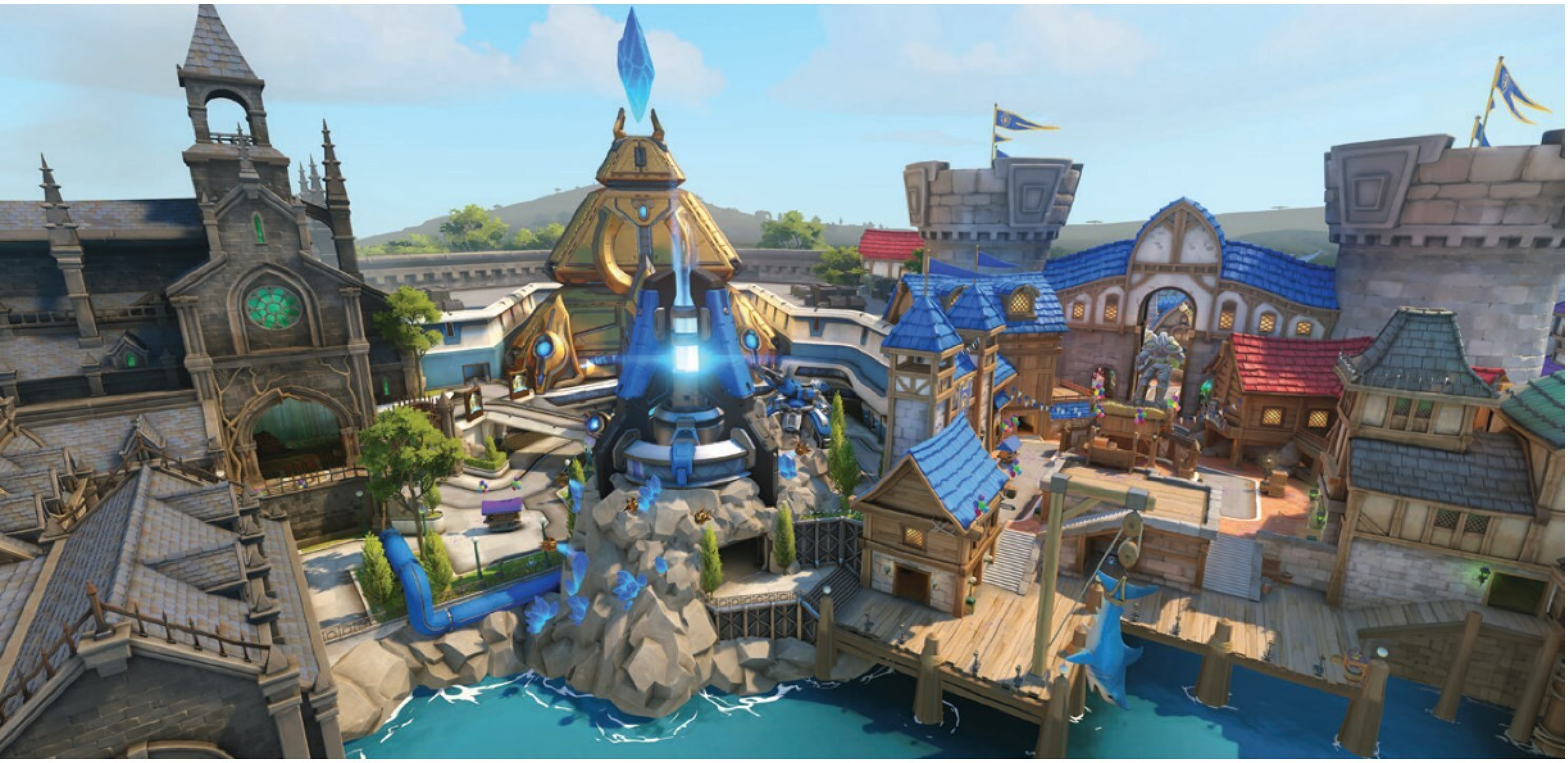
Break open a barrel in the Diablo area and you might see some epic loot pop out, though you won't be able to equip it. The probes in the StarCraft area operate as they would when you start mining in the beginning of a match. The gameplay announcer changes depending on which area you're in to match that theme. The payload can be a random object from one of the Blizzard games. You get the point – this map is loaded with fun stuff.

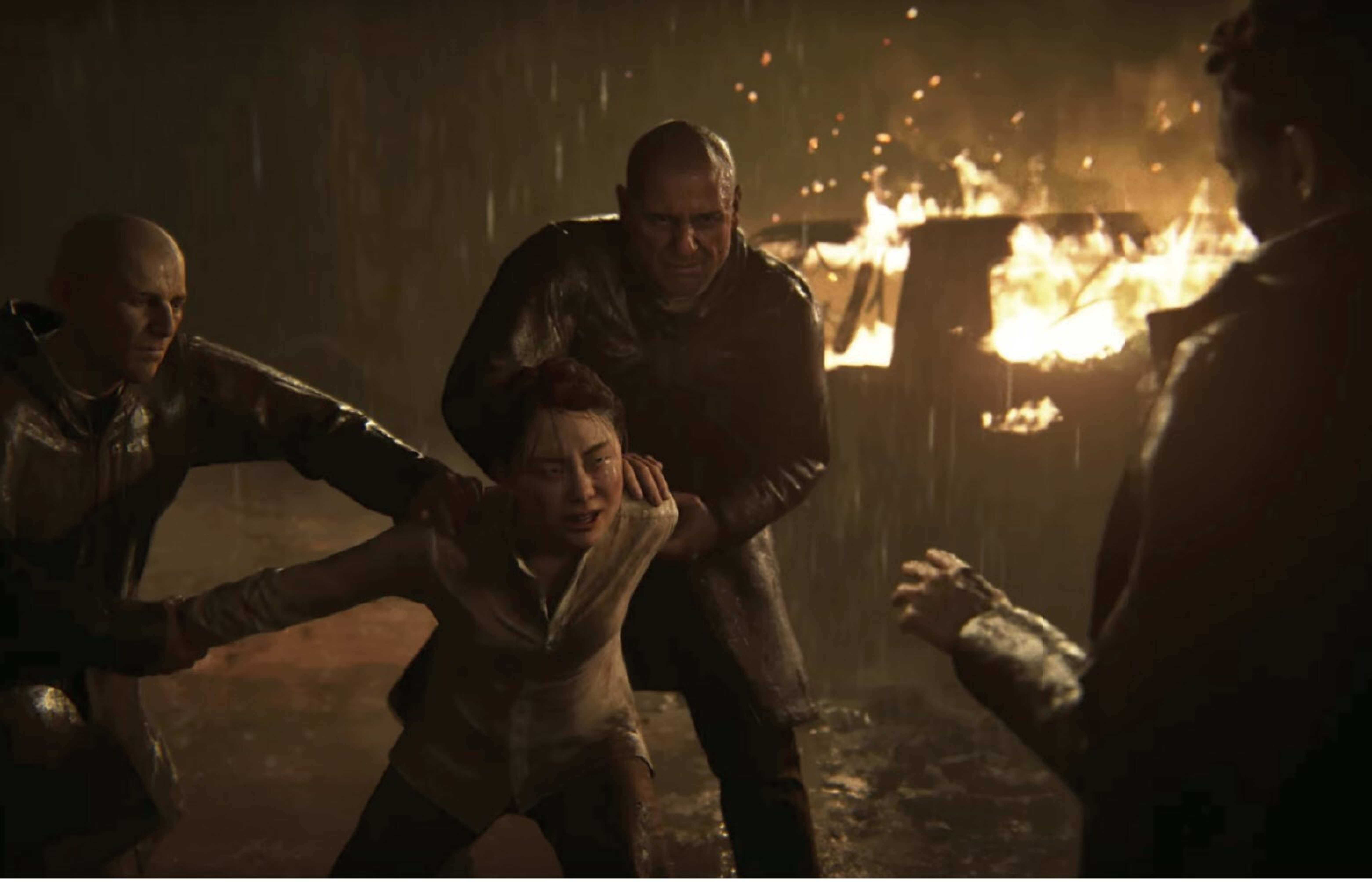
Last year was a great one for Blizzard's breakout team shooter, and 2018 promises even more. I can't wait to play Moira and explore everything Blizzard World has to offer. » **Daniel Tack**

Deal out both healing and harm with Moira's kit

HEROES ARCADE
HEROES

The park is dotted with all kinds of interesting places to explore





The Last Of Us Part II

A ruthless look at Naughty Dog's next chapter

» Platform
PS4
» Style
1-Player Action
» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment
» Developer
Naughty Dog
» Release
2018

When The Last of Us Part II was revealed last year at PlayStation Experience, creative director Neil Druckmann boldly stated that it would be "a story of hate." We may not entirely know what that means until the game releases, but thanks to a new trailer shown at Paris Games Week last month, we saw some of that hate manifest itself through brutality.

The cinematic trailer defied expectations by omitting Ellie and Joel from the teaser completely, focusing on new characters, and featuring ruthless violence toward women. Reactions to the trailer were mixed, but one thing is clear: this next game strikes a tone even more brutal than the last.

The teaser begins with two hooded figures dragging a woman through the mud, her head hanging low in exhaustion. She's then strung up to a tree, but a pail is left for her to stand on so that she doesn't meet her fate just yet.

Scenes of both torture and overt violence ensue as the trailer progresses. A woman's arm is viciously hammered in order to break her bones, and the hanging woman uses her legs to choke another character beneath her until a hammer claw to the head finishes the job. Even for a series known for its violence, this disturbing imagery felt confusing and gratuitous, leaving us with little context as to why it was all happening.

Luckily, Naughty Dog has given us some breadcrumbs. A string of tweets from the studio named three of the women in the trailer as Yara, Lev, and Emily. The woman who was about to be hanged remains unnamed. Naughty Dog revealed that she is played by Laura Bailey, and that the character's name is four letters long. This has led some fans to believe that this woman is Ellie's mother, Anna.

However, Anna died shortly after Ellie's birth, meaning it's possible The Last of Us Part II's campaign jumps back and forth through time. Another sign that points to her being Anna is that when Emily presses a knife toward maybe-Anna's belly, she says, "They are nested with sin." While this could be a reference to the apocalyptic infection, it could also mean that she is pregnant with Ellie.

It also seems like there are either warring factions or different sides portrayed in the trailer. When Yara requests Lev to also help the other woman, Lev hesitates before complying, retorting that "she is one of them." Emily also seems to hold a leadership-like role, since she gives orders to her burly henchmen. What the stakes and motives are of these conflicting groups remains to be seen.

Back in August, sleuths on Reddit deduced from concept art that The Last of Us Part II takes place either partly or completely in Seattle. This theory seems even more plausible after this trailer, which has some clues about the location hidden in the background. For example, a road sign that is nearly identical to a real-life sign in Seattle, is seen in the opening moments of the teaser.

It's unclear how these new characters connect to the protagonists and how important they are, but our curiosity is piqued. Will this game about "hate" still have those earnest moments the series is known for? With a trailer portraying violence without context, it gave fans more questions than answers. We're eager to see how this grim tale turns out when Part II releases next year. » **Elise Favis**

Session

Learning new tricks

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Sports
(Online TBD)

» Publisher
Crea-ture Studios

» Developer
Crea-ture Studios

» Release
Summer (Early Access)

The Tony Hawk and Skate series had their differences, but both made it easy to pull off hardcore skateboard tricks at the press of a button or flick of a stick. New developer Crea-ture Studios is approaching the sport from a slightly different angle. Session's control scheme is more difficult than what we're used to, but it aims to give even the simplest trick an elevated sense of accomplishment.

The game's hardcore and real-stances control modes split your avatar's legs into the right and left analog sticks, respectively, instead of confining the trick controls to one stick and the steering on the other like Skate. Furthermore, pushing is on the A button and steering on the triggers, so Session does not feel like previous skating titles. "I'm not sure this kind of call would have passed [at a publisher]," says creative director Marc-Andre Houde. "We probably would have been forced to make it a more accessible, maybe more mainstream method of navigating for a game."

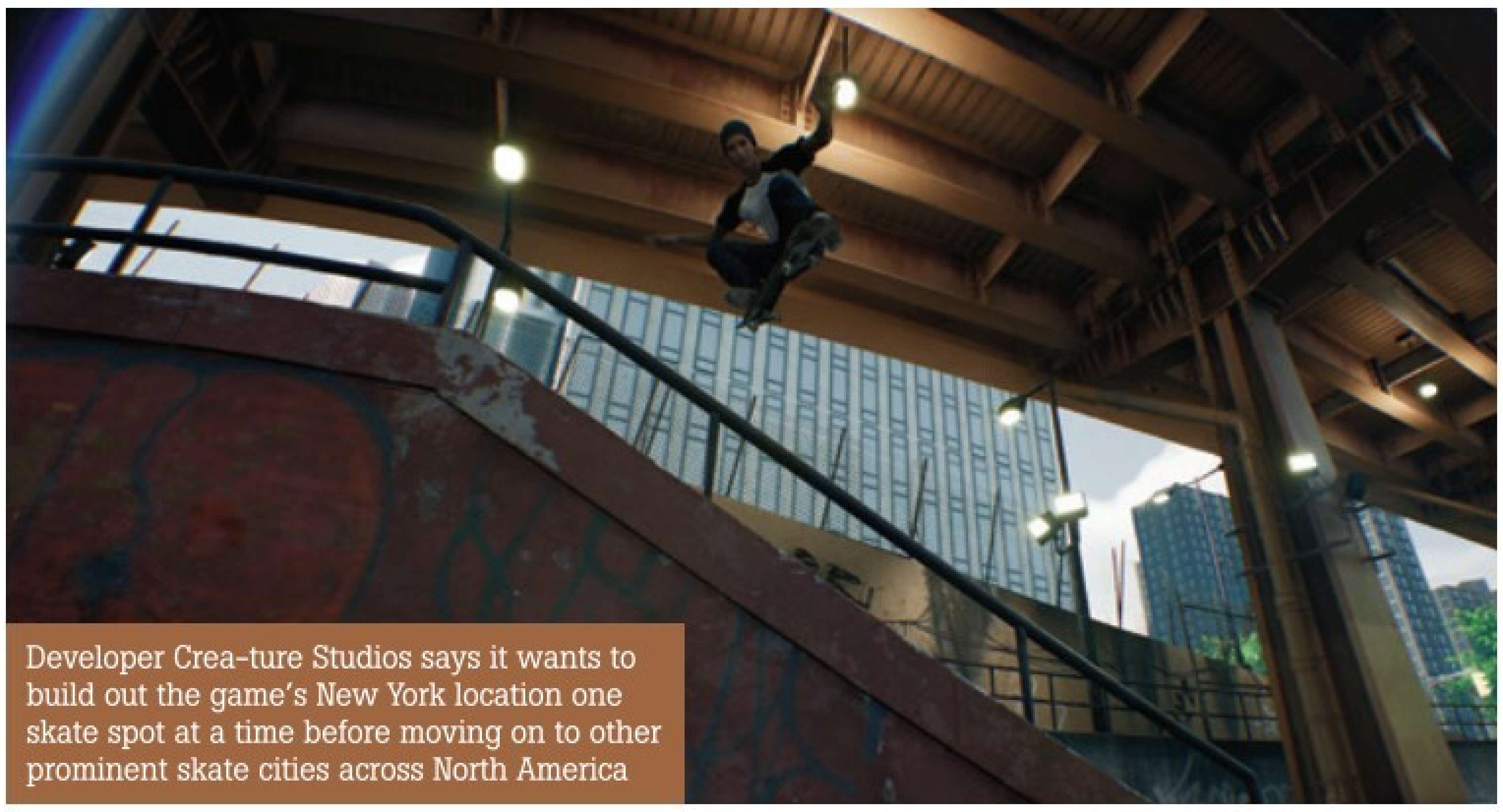
Playing the early demo of Session, the novel control scheme takes getting used to and isn't immediately natural. In the head of a lifelong-skater like Houde, however, telling his feet to do different things depending on which way he's facing is what he does every time he jumps on his board in real life. The game features a simplified control setting that locks the controls so you don't have to keep track of which foot is leading on the board and therefore switch which one starts a trick. Whichever scheme you use, Session's controls aim to give the user a sense of satisfaction for pulling off tricks, reclaiming it from the gonzo arcade nature of previous titles which have dulled our appreciation for these complicated maneuvers.

The control scheme isn't the only thing that strives for a manner of realism. "Skateboarding is a really creative sport, so we really want to make sure we are not going to dictate which trick is worth what or anything like this," Houde says. "We're really trying to keep this as open as we can so people don't always feel forced to do the same combo tricks because this is the one that pays the most." De-emphasizing a combo score may remove an easy way for players to gauge themselves against others, but skating is a sport where the admiration of your peers is more quantifiable than an arbitrary score. Accordingly, Sessions includes the ability to broadcast your achievements via various social channels as a way to gain respect.

The game starts in the streets of New York City (other cities will be added as updates), with vert/ramp skating as a stretch goal for the recently activated Kickstarter project. Other features on the stretch-goal wish list include a park editor and a mode to film your friends in action. Houde talked about the need for licensed clothing – something that's important to him because of brands' importance in skating – but didn't have any official deals he could mention.

Activision's 2015 reboot of Tony Hawk didn't take, and while fans have been clamoring for EA to make Skate 4, it's not on the horizon. Sessions – made by a team of two developers and assorted freelancers – doesn't follow exactly in these famous series' footsteps, but it's also not here just to fill a void. The game's unorthodox control scheme makes demands of players, but they can reap its rewards as well.

» Matthew Kato



Developer Crea-ture Studios says it wants to build out the game's New York location one skate spot at a time before moving on to other prominent skate cities across North America

FREEDOM AIRLINES

The Crew 2

Letting players chart their own race course

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Racing

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ivory Tower

» Release
March 16

In The Crew, players raced across a compact version of the United States. The idea of having that much freedom, even if the map is dramatically scaled down and the country only features six major cities is intriguing. Unfortunately, the first game handicapped the level of freedom by gating progression through the world and limiting how players could interact with events. With The Crew 2, developer Ivory Tower hopes to tear down those walls to give players the power to create their own stories and enjoy the massive vehicular playground at their own leisure.

Much like its predecessor, The Crew 2 lets players speed through a smaller version of the United States, including multiple major cities. This time, however, in addition to different road vehicles, you can swap to airplanes and boats as well. This can be done through menus, or you can designate a favorite vehicle for each style and hot-swap on the go using the Fast Fav system. Cruising down the highway can easily turn into a flight through the skies with a press of the button.

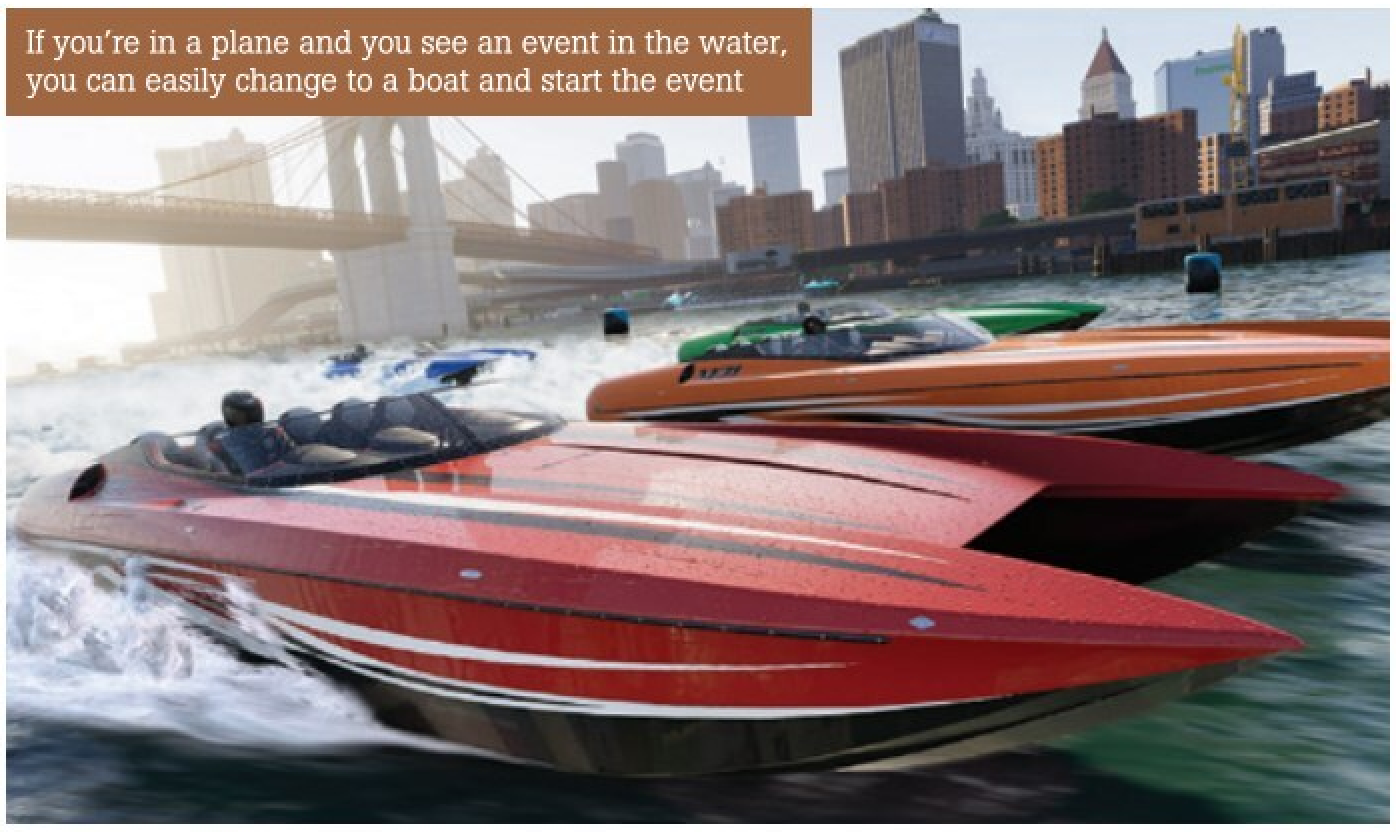
This plays into the notion of a seamless open world Ivory Tower is implementing in The Crew 2. That seamlessness includes starting events without the need to navigate through menus or wait during load times. "If you want, you can go through and select a mission, but if you're driving, we are launching the mission without stopping the player from driving their car or boat or plane," says player experience director Julien Hummer. "If you see a tag on the water while you're with your plane, you Fast Fav to your boat, dive into the water, and you can start the mission without loading."

Part of that seamless open world is removing the progression gates of The Crew 2's predecessor. After about 30 minutes of playing, Hummer claims the world is entirely open and you are free to explore the country and enter events across multiple racing disciplines as you choose. "We don't want to block the player," he says. "We want you to pick up whatever you want to do quite quickly in the game. There is no restriction."

In the Crew 2, players can choose to follow the main storyline of trying to become a legendary multidisciplinary racer, or they can just mess around with friends to create their own memories. To capitalize on that, Ivory Tower is improving its photo mode from the first game, while adding an intuitive replay mode where players can easily record, edit, and share their best moments.

With so much freedom, The Crew 2 looks to be a wondrous playground where players can race across the United States how they choose. Whether you like tearing down straightaways in a supercar, offroading in a lifted truck, taking to the water in a powerboat, screaming around corners in a drift car, or flying above the clouds in a jet, The Crew 2's message of freedom appears intact regardless of your fancy. » **Brian Shea**

Changing vehicles on the fly is easy thanks to the Fast Fav hot-swap system


If you're in a plane and you see an event in the water, you can easily change to a boat and start the event

For Honor

Charting the future of an ancient battle

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

» Release
TBA

At launch, For Honor's methodical-but-brutal combat system and expansive take on multiplayer was enticing, but technical issues discouraged many players from sticking with it long-term. Since then, Ubisoft Montreal has taken great pains to overhaul the online infrastructure and offer players something new on the regular; seasonal updates have added six new maps and characters apiece, as well as new modes to dig into. A recent Halloween-themed event added a layer of kitschy fun to the experience. Going forward, the team is looking to both improve the online and keep players occupied with new events and updates.

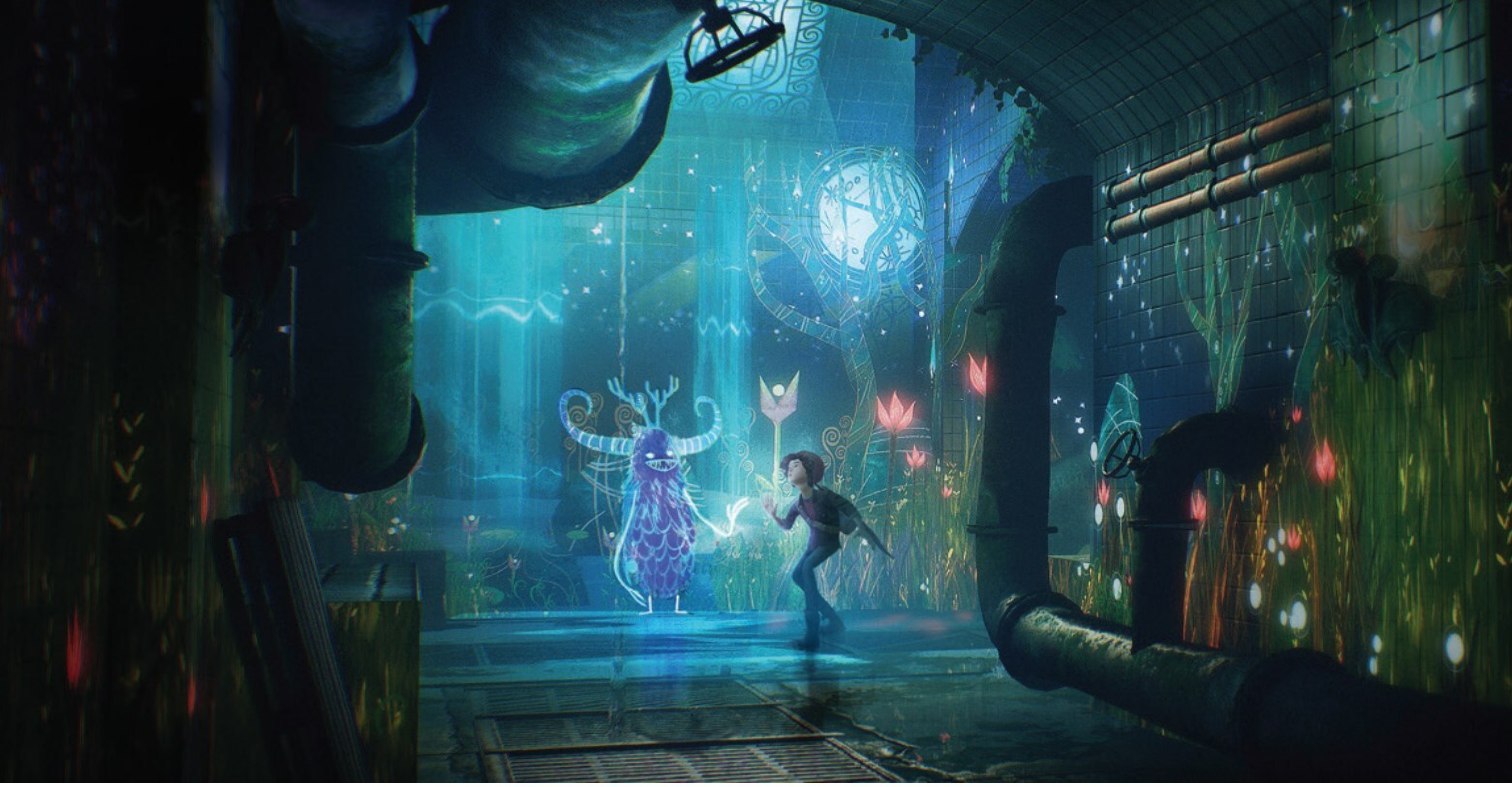
The team acknowledges the stability concerns, and since then has taken steps to ensure players can both find and stay connected to online matches. However, there was only so much fixing the team could do under the old peer-to-peer network. "We understood that if we want to raise the ceiling as much as we could, we had to change the architecture," says director Damien Kieken. "You don't change an online engine when your game is live." To that end, the game will soon be switching to dedicated servers, and Kieken is confident the game will be far more stable as a result.

Kieken also stresses keeping the game balanced and competitive is important. Recent updates have introduced one-on-one and four-on-four ranked modes (such as the recent capture the flag-like mode, Tribute), and making sure every character remains a viable option is crucial. The team is always working on balance updates, but in the coming months hopes to introduce more thorough tweaks, such as adding new moves and animations to weaker characters, giving them new options on the battlefield.

The team is also adding new incentives for lapsed players to dive back in. A new tutorial mode offers players the chance to re-learn finer nuances of combat and features a minor narrative element to get players back into the swing of things. Additionally, Salvage (a currency earned from breaking down gear) currently doesn't offer many uses beyond upgrading gear, but Kieken says soon players will be able to spend it on more than upgrading weapons and armor.

Building on the success of the Feast of the Otherworld Halloween event (which saw a small spike in players, according to Kieken), For Honor is also planning more themed events. Fans have already uncovered a hidden ice-based map within the game, and Ubisoft Montreal confirms the map will be part of an upcoming event in December. Kieken also teased another event, this one coinciding with the game's one-year anniversary on Valentine's Day, is in the works.

These myriad changes and additions prove that while Ubisoft Montreal didn't put its best foot forward initially, it's listening to player feedback and dedicated to keeping For Honor alive for a long time. Players who were wary of stability issues at launch will hopefully have little to fear once dedicated servers are implemented, and anyone who fell away from it should have plenty of new offerings to explore now and in the coming months. » **Suriel Vazquez**



Concrete Genie

Painting a magical world

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action/Adventure

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
PixelOpus

» Release
2018

One of the more intriguing games revealed during Paris Games Week was Concrete Genie, an imaginative graffiti-focused title created by the same team behind the mesmerizing rhythm game Entwined.

Concrete Genie tells the story of Ash, a young boy living in a small fishing town named Denska, who discovers he can bring his paintings to life. He uses this power to escape his real-world hardships, and conceive a magical retreat of his own through his creations.

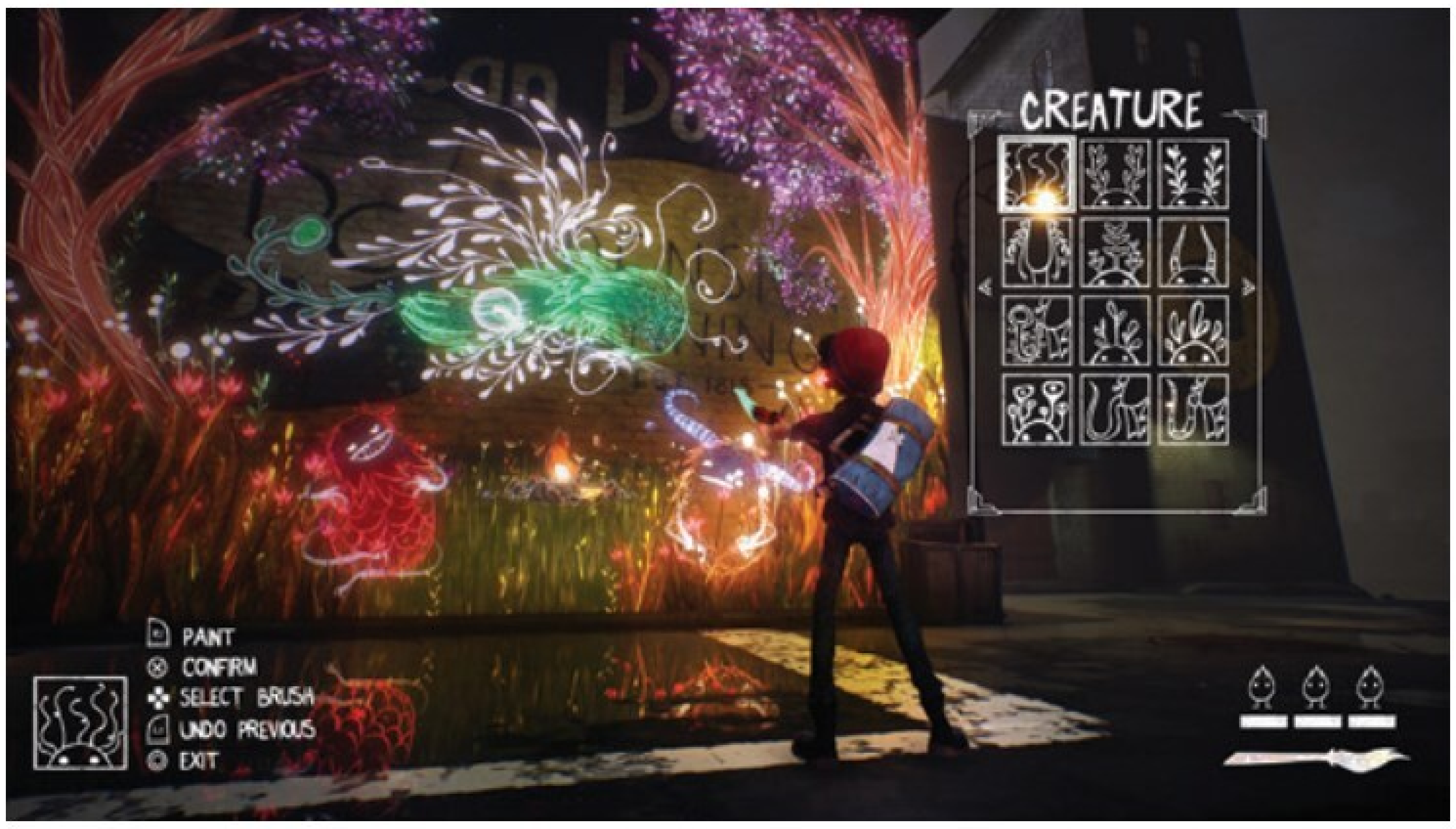
The main mechanic in Concrete Genie revolves around painting the walls of the city. By using the DualShock 4 motion sensor, you create paintings that live and breathe – you can even spend time hanging out with the magical beasts you create. You can draw your own designs, but you have plenty of templates to choose from too. For example, you can choose different landscapes for the backdrop of your street art, including ponds, fields, canyons, and more. Different brushes have unique strokes, and you can select several creatures to customize and add to your artwork.

Seeing these paintings come to life is what makes Concrete Genie stand out. Flowers and plants sway in a magical wind, drawn butterflies fly away, a waterfall drips down a brick wall, and a painted moon shines bright. Every brush stroke looks vibrant, and the style gives off a children's book aesthetic. The creatures you make each have their own particular A.I., and developer PixelOpus says that each will be unique to different players.

Because Ash has to fight off bullies in real-life, graffiti becomes his safe haven. The dead-end town he lives in is nearly abandoned and affected by pollution. Luckily, Ash's special powers can help cleanse that pollution and keep it at bay, perhaps even restoring the town to its former glory.

In an interview with PlayStation, PixelOpus' art director Jeff Sangalli said the team has learned a lot from their previous work with Entwined. "What we learned from Entwined is that we want to make games that have an emotional connection to the player – games that have heart," he said.

Exactly how Ash's creative adventure with paint turns out remains to be seen. We look forward to checking it out when it releases next year. » **Elise Favis**



Golem

Halo and Destiny developers attempt a more personal story

Highwire Games co-founders Jaime Griesemer and Martin O'Donnell have impressive histories in the video game industry. Both played central roles at Halo creator Bungie, with Griesemer working on the design while O'Donnell composed the series' impressive score and sound design. With their new studio, the duo is tackling a much different kind of game on a new platform: virtual reality. "Marty and I have a long history of jumping on new technology and trying to figure out how it works and what the best way to utilize it is," Griesemer says. "Going back to the first days of Halo and working on the Xbox, everyone said you couldn't do a good first-person shooter on a gamepad."

The studio's first game, Golem, tells a smaller story than Halo, but it is a much more personal one. Players take on the role of young girl bedridden after an unfortunate accident. She can't walk, but through a mysterious magic, she can remotely control giant golems. "A large part of the game is going into this ancient enormous abandoned city and exploring it and finding your way through it," Griesemer says. You solve puzzles in the city and engage in melee combat using a single PlayStation Move controller.

"I am a huge Dark Souls fan. I love the intensity that Dark Souls brings where it awards patience and being very methodical and careful, and the second you try to rush it, it punishes you," Griesemer says. Golem won't be as punishing as Dark Souls, as your progress will carry forward if you die (or in this case, lose a Golem), but Griesemer wants players to approach combat and exploration with a similar, careful execution.

Combat and exploration play key roles in the experience, but Highwire Games acknowledges that one of the key elements of a game that will keep players returning is the presence of characters you want to interact with placed in a world and narrative that you want to live in. "The story and the world we've built is incredibly important," Griesemer says. Even though O'Donnell is primarily known for sound, he's always worked closely with the development teams on this front as well. "I've always been involved with talking to the writers about the story, and helping to cast the actors, and then direct the voice actors, and sound design," O'Donnell says. Griesemer corroborates, citing the memorable scenes that introduced the Flood in Halo as benefiting greatly from O'Donnell's input and suggestions. "I like to put that emotional musical polish on a game," O'Donnell says.

Not every game needs a bombastic world-saving space opera story to back it up, and Highwire Games hopes to use VR to showcase that. "Golem has kind of a childlike sense of wonder and it's almost a storybook feel," Griesemer says. "There's danger and there's excitement, and drama and there are stakes, but it is about your family and your relationship with your older sister." O'Donnell has his own thoughts on Golem's world. "It's like really living inside of a Grimm fairy tale," he says. » **Kyle Hilliard**

» Platform
PSVR

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Highwire Games

» Developer
Highwire Games

» Release
Spring

Echoes Of The First Dreamer

While working on Destiny with Bungie, Martin O'Donnell had plans for a prequel album. "I worked for a couple years on a thing called Music of the Spheres, which was the musical prequel to Destiny, and then – let's see, how shall I say this? A bunch of stuff happened," O'Donnell says, citing his public and unwilling departure from the studio. As a result, the album never released, but O'Donnell still liked the idea. Highwire Games co-founder Jaime Griesemer suggested doing something comparable for Golem.

The result is "Echoes of the First Dreamer," a prequel album for Golem that functions as a standalone record, but includes music that will also appear in the game. You can hear the album now, and it may surprise you if you're familiar with O'Donnell's previous work. "I actually made a conscious choice to use almost no big percussion," O'Donnell says. "Just strings, woodwinds, piano, and harp, so it's a chamber-orchestra approach. The music itself feels a little more magical. A little more, the wonder of childhood kind of thing."

Spider-Man

The spectacular Peter Parker

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Insomniac Games

» Release
2018

Unlike most superheroes, Spider-Man's alter ego is nearly as important as the mask he wears. Peter Parker is a socially awkward kid who struggles with daily chores and responsibilities. Peter's everyman nature has helped Marvel's iconic hero to resonate with fans for more than half a century. Insomniac seems to understand that Peter's persona is an important component to any Spider-Man story.

"The best Spider-Man experiences are when Peter's world and Spider-Man's world collide," says creative director Bryan Intihar. "If you're just showing the Spider-Man aspects of the world, you're only getting half the experience. Especially with a hero like Spider-Man, the Peter Parker side of his life is such an integral experience. We didn't want to just see that in cutscenes. We felt it was important to have playable sequences as Peter."

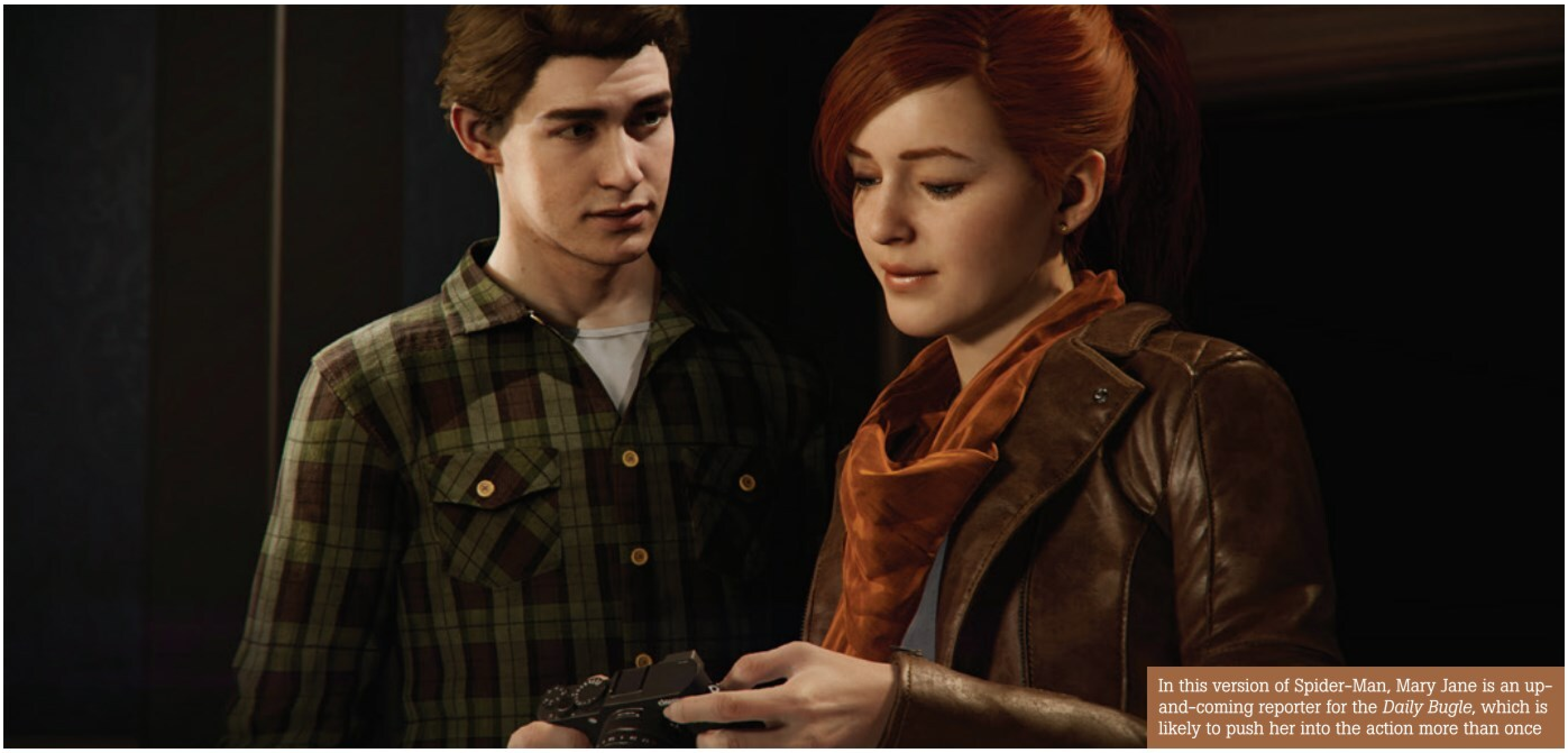
Insomniac remains cagey about how these Parker sequences play out, but it recently showed off some of Peter's supporting cast. In a new trailer that debuted during Paris Games Week, we got a first look at mainstays like Aunt May and Mary Jane, as well as another tease of the newest Spider-Man, Miles Morales. Insomniac's version of Spider-Man takes place in its own reality, so some of these characters might behave differently from their comic book counterparts. For example, Mary Jane isn't an actress or model; she is one of the *Daily Bugle*'s up-and-coming reporters, which means she may find herself on the frontlines of superhero throw-downs.

"MJ will also be playable, but that's something that wasn't part of the original plan," Intihar says. "We just thought, we have this great superhero world, but what is it like for someone who doesn't have superpowers? We thought that putting you into the role of someone like Mary Jane would give you a unique experience in that world. We want to get away from the damsel in distress character that she's been portrayed as, and we want to make her a much more capable contributor and risk-taker."

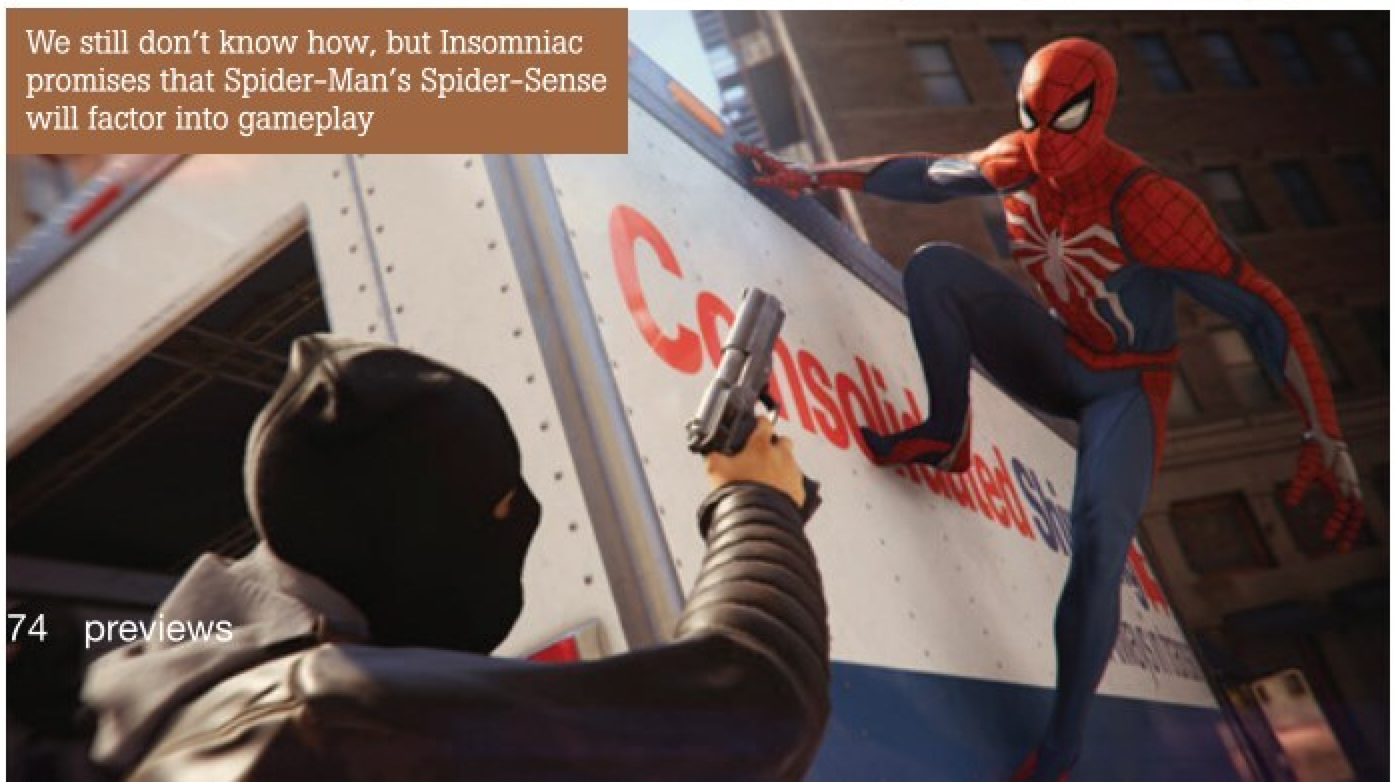
Insomniac's recent trailer featured a heavy emphasis on characters and story, but the studio also gave us a glimpse at its version of an open-world New York. Spider-Man's New York is the largest world that Insomniac has ever built. But what you do in this world is still a mystery – the team isn't ready to show off exactly what Peter is up to when he's not chasing down the Kingpin or Mister Negative.

"We wanted to create a world that was fun, and that matches what people think of New York City, but it's also a Marvel New York City," Intihar says. "If you look carefully in one of the shots of the trailer you can see Dr. Strange's Sanctum, and we will have other Marvel landmarks in there. We want to make sure that it feels not only like the version of New York that people have in their head, but that it also feels like a Marvel New York City."

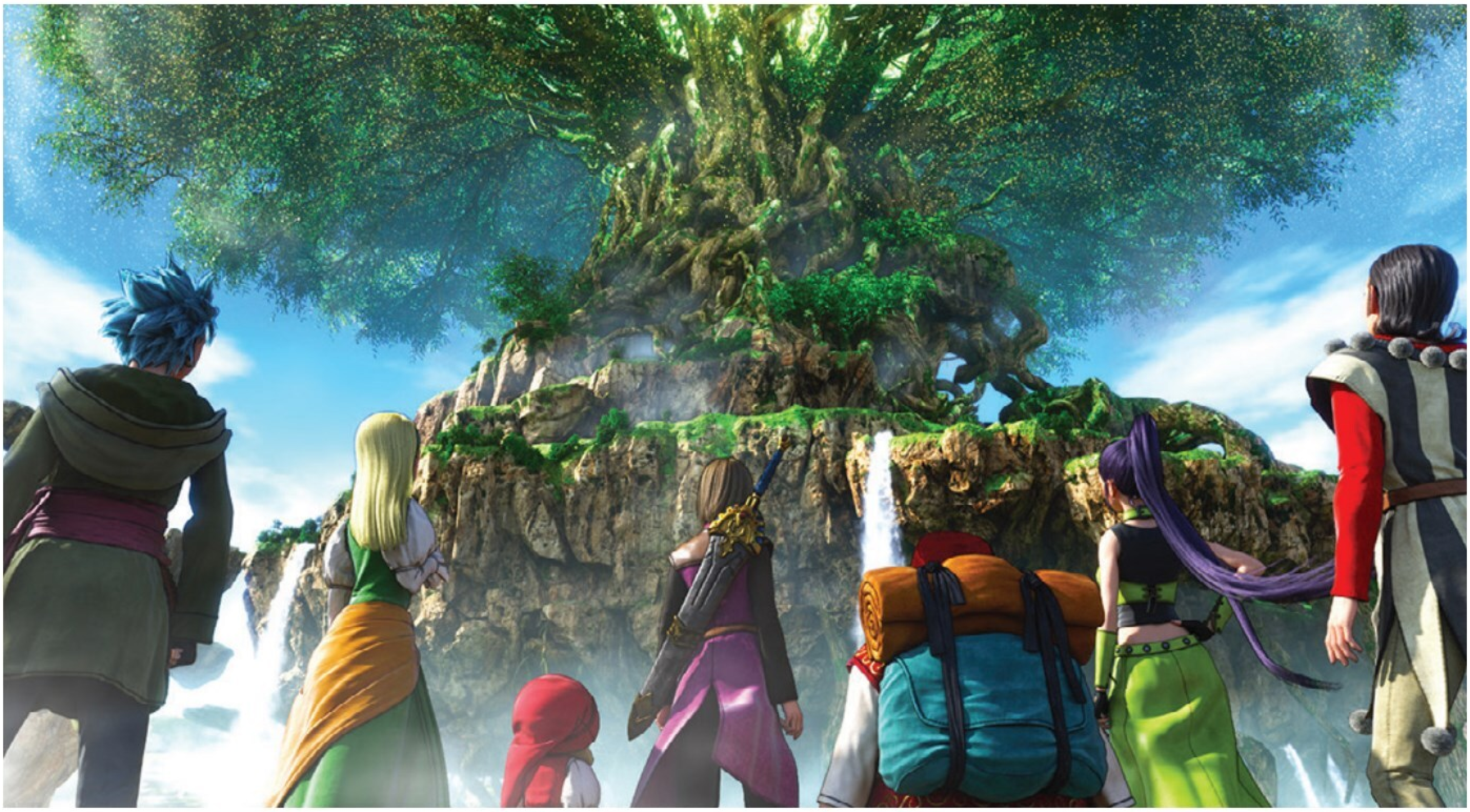
Previous demos and trailers have showcased Spider-Man's high-flying action and blockbuster set pieces, so we're glad Insomniac has finally peeled back the curtain on the narrative, if only a bit. Spider-Man's action is undoubtedly an important part of the overall package, but fans should be happy that the studio is paying attention to both sides of the mask. » **Ben Reeves**



In this version of Spider-Man, Mary Jane is an up-and-coming reporter for the *Daily Bugle*, which is likely to push her into the action more than once



We still don't know how, but Insomniac promises that Spider-Man's Spider-Sense will factor into gameplay



Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

Old meets new in this hybrid RPG

» Platform
TBA

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Armor Project,
Square Enix

» Release
2018

Dragon Quest is the world's longest-running JRPG series, with over 30 years under its belt. Its place in history is undeniable, as it helped set a template for turn-based battle systems and its iconic slime became a mascot for the classic, adventure-driven series. The franchise has been a powerhouse in Japan, but never reached the same level of fanfare in the Western market. After keeping fans wondering if Square Enix had given up on the classic series coming to North America, creator Yuji Horii confirmed the next entry in the long-running franchise is indeed on its way, and that the localization process has already started.

Unfortunately, it's still up in the air what platforms are coming to North America. In Japan, the game launched on PS4 and 3DS, and eventually will come to Switch. In America, Nintendo has been localizing the remakes and IX for its handheld systems, but Square Enix has brought us the recent Dragon Quest Heroes spin-offs. Time will tell if we receive all versions, but until then, I spent some time with the import of the PS4 version and chatted with the producers to discover more about the game.

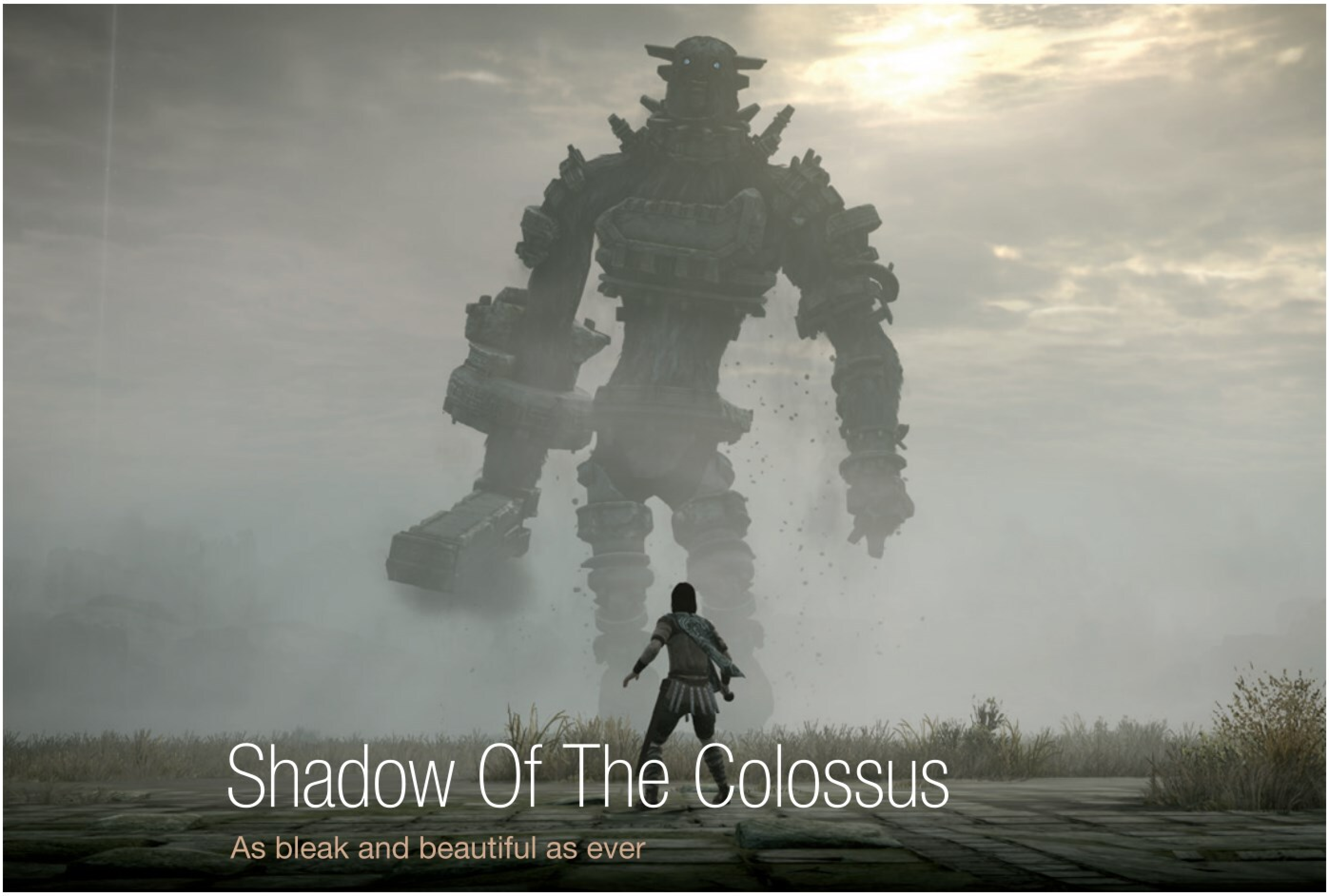
In Dragon Quest XI, you're placed in the shoes of a hero with a mysterious past. When he's a baby, a ghostly figure invades his town, bringing monsters to attack the kingdom. To save our infant hero, he's placed in a basket along the river, where a fisherman eventually finds him and takes him in. The story then flashes to 16 years later, as he's about to compete in a coming-of-age ceremony for the village. With his childhood friend Emma by his side, they explore a cave to get to a mountaintop for the ceremony, taking out baddies who get in the way. Of course, not everything goes according to plan as apparitions and a giant bird interrupt their plans. This desperate moment activates a symbol on our hero's hand, imbuing him with a special power, leading to lightning called from the heavens.

The battle system remains similar to past entries, but this time you can move freely around the battlefield while your attacks are on a cooldown. You still have the basic attack, magic, and defend commands. If you prefer the old-school, fixed first-person view, you can choose that option. One nice feature is you can swap your weapon during battle, allowing you to equip either a longsword or two-handed sword for the main character, and various weaponry for your allies.

The game still feels very much like Dragon Quest, but the visual upgrade on the PS4 is noticeable thanks to more detailed animations and environments. The world feels more alive, with hidden nooks to explore and characters around every bend offering side quests or information. "We put in monster habitats, upped the amount of enemies you find on the field, and the ways the villages move and interact" says producer Yuu Miyake.

Players should also prepare for a long trek. According to the team, people who just go through the main story put about 80 hours into the game, while those who play the side content finish around 120 hours. Dragon Quest XI won't have any DLC, so that hefty experience is what you get from the start. "We didn't do DLC this time, which allowed us to have that kind of volume of content that you can enjoy as a single package," says producer Hokuto Okamato. "We were worried people would say, 'It's too long," but what we're [hearing is], "Wow, I just really got absorbed."

Dragon Quest finds itself in an awkward space where it's trying to retain its classic vibe, but still tantalize new and modern fans. "I'm very confident we'll be able to satisfy old-school fans and what they're looking for," Miyake says. "But at the same time, I think a lot of new players will also come in and I think those new players will not see it as something old-fashioned or outdated, and they will be able to accept it and play it as a modern game." Hopefully, we get the best of both worlds. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Shadow Of The Colossus

As bleak and beautiful as ever

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Bluepoint

» **Release**
February 6

When Shadow of the Colossus first released in 2005, it shaped a lot of what people thought about adventure games in the modern era of video games. Its dark tone, laser-focused gameplay, and grandiose scale had never been seen in the same portions that Team Ico doled out. Now, 12 years later, a remake is trying to capture the same feelings Shadow of the Colossus invoked when players first got their hands on it.

A young man known as Wander is desperate to revive a woman in a similarly dead land. Partnered with his horse Aggro, Wander takes it upon himself to find and kill Colossi scattered about the continent. The story, told almost wordlessly, makes the player feel more and more uncomfortable as they become more like the monsters they're slaying.

The developers behind the remake, Bluepoint, have a slavish dedication to making the game play like the PlayStation 2 original. While a new, more modern control scheme is available as an option, the game plays nearly identical to the original. No new Colossi come with this version, and all the bosses from the original remain intact.

As a graphical remake, Shadow of the Colossus looks incredible, and can hold its own as a modern-looking title against others made from the ground up for the PlayStation 4. Every texture is new, every effect freshly crafted, and the desolate and dying world has never looked better. The graphics even retain a level of dirt and grime that helped make said world feel bleak and lonely. The game is also now targeting 60 frames per second, where the original game averaged around 25.

Small new details bring the world to life. Weeds spring up between bricks, a scattering of trees becomes a lush forest blocking your way, a broken altar's ruins show chips and cracks from the harsh desert sands. These minute changes add more detail, but make the work feel a little more alive than Fumito Ueda's original vision when taken in aggregate.

While the remake looks better, playing like the original game means that smaller issues stand out a decade later. Aggro's stubbornness when coming across debris on the ground feels more frustrating than it did before. The camera getting completely covered by a boss is less acceptable now than it was when video game cameras were still being experimented with.

Shadow of the Colossus is a game that everyone should play once in their lives, and there is no reason to expect the PlayStation 4 remake won't be the definitive version. If you have never played the game before, you should keep this on your watch list.
» **Imran Khan**

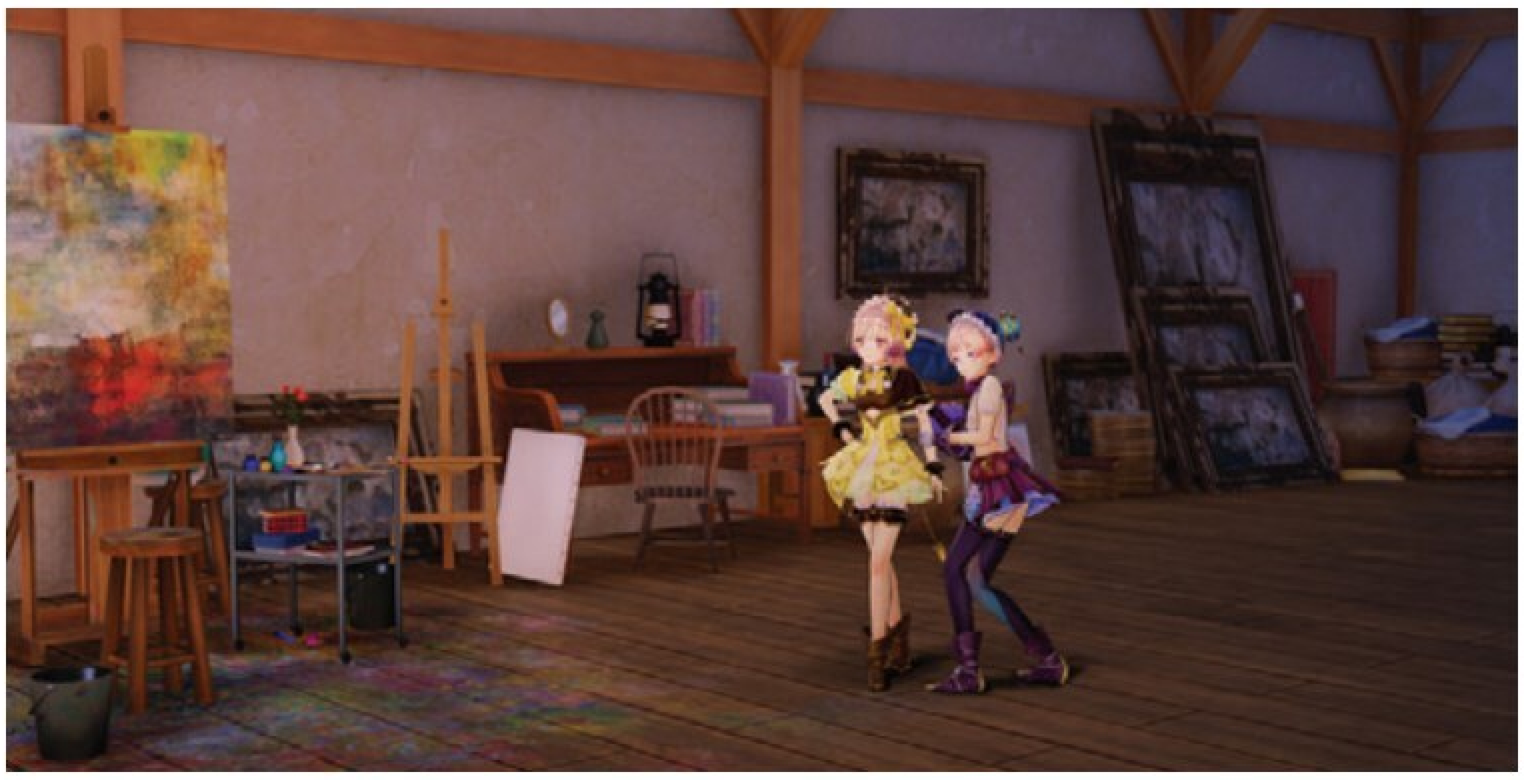
Atelier Lydie & Suelle: The Alchemists And The Mysterious Paintings

It takes two to jump through paintings

Coming off its 20th anniversary, the niche Atelier series has plenty to celebrate. With annualized releases, fans can always look forward to putting their alchemy skills to the test in interesting locales. Atelier Lydie and Suelle: The Alchemists and the Mysterious Paintings is the latest entry, and it takes things to a colorful, artistic world, where sisters jump through paintings to connect with their deceased mother.

This entry stars two main protagonists: twins Lydie and Suelle, who are hoping to help their father and take the alchemy business to the next level. Lydie is the older twin and likes to go at her own pace and think things through. The gun-toting Suelle is the opposite – she's more tomboyish and full of energy.

The main focus of the game is the day-to-day experience of chatting with villagers and working in the alchemy shop, but Lydie and Suelle can jump into paintings for more fantastical locales, from a gloomy Halloween-inspired forest to an ethereal flower garden with falling rain of stars. This is where they obtain the more interesting ingredients for alchemy. The puzzle-like synthesis system is back, where you place ingredients with different shapes and tiles on a grid. A new enhancing agent can also change the colors of the panels, providing varied outcomes.



The turn-based battle system returns with some tweaks. One character takes an attack role, while the other is support. At times, your support character acts independently to help create devastating combos. Your party members fight in pairs, and you can bring up to six participants into combat. Because Lydie and Suelle are twins, expect battles to feature combination attacks, skills, and alchemy.

Let's hope the final entry in the series' Mysterious arc can go out with a bang and not a whimper. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» Platform
PS4 • Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Koei Tecmo

» Developer
Gust

» Release
March 27

DECEMBER
REWARDS CENTER
FEATURED ITEMS
3,900 pts PlayStation Store $3
11,500 pts PlayStation Store $10 Reward Certificate
11,500 pts XBOX LIVE $10 Reward Certificate
3,900 pts XBOX LIVE $3
5,000 pts GameStop $5
10,000 pts GameStop $10 Reward Certificate
25,000 pts GameStop $25 Reward Certificate
15,000 pts THINKGEEK $15 Reward Certificate
10,000 pts THINKGEEK $10
5,000 pts THINKGEEK $5
Find these items and more at **www.PowerUpRewards.com**
GameStop POWERUP REWARDS

Ashes Of Creation

Crafting new worlds

» Platform
PC

» Style
MMORPG

» Publisher
Intrepid Studios

» Developer
Intrepid Studios

» Release
TBA

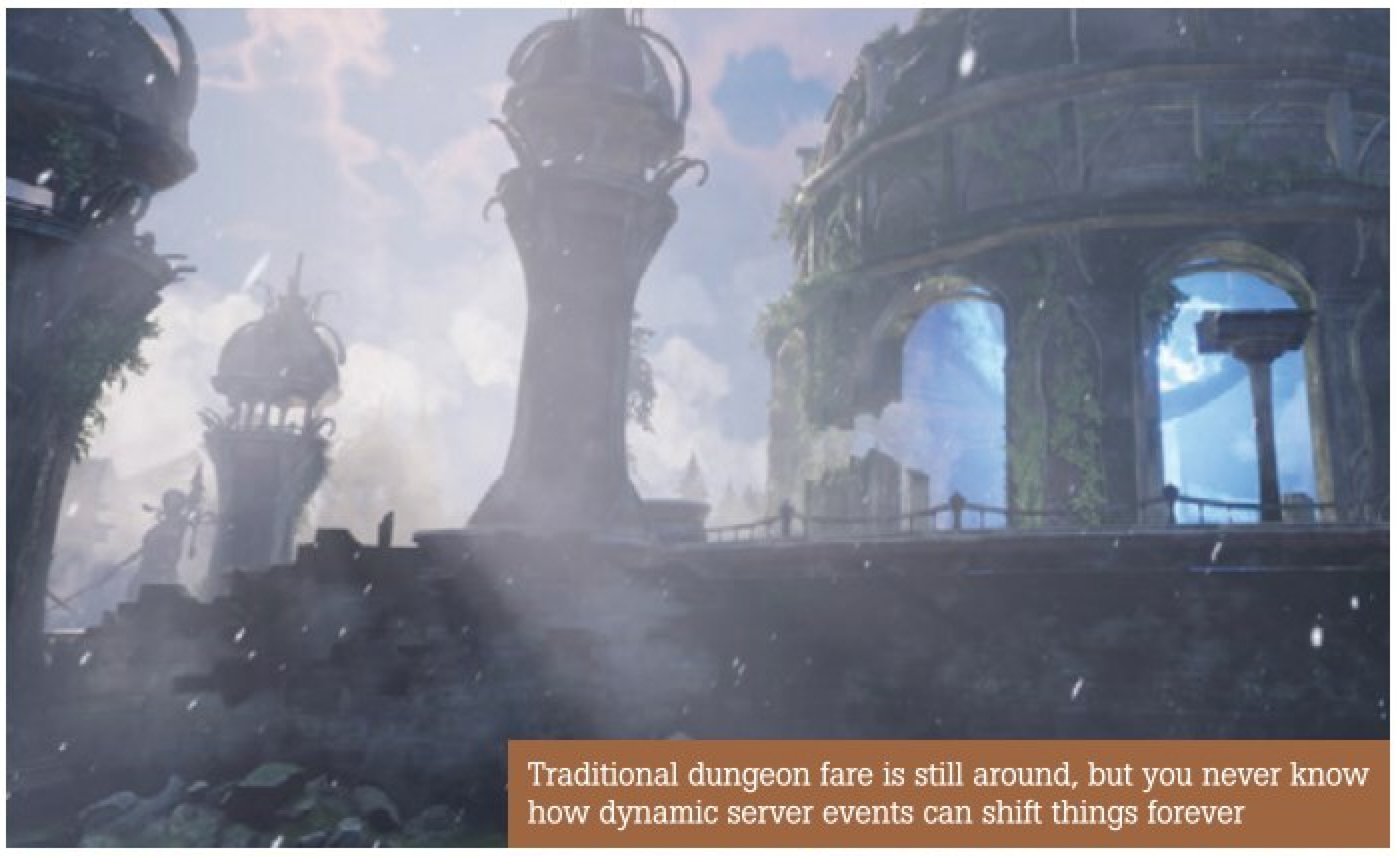
The world of MMORPGs has slowed down in terms of new offerings in recent years, with the longstanding genre giants taking the attention off those looking to break into the lucrative but incredibly competitive space. That isn't stopping Intrepid Studios from planting the seeds for Ashes of Creation, a new entry that combines old-school respect for the titles that popularized the genre with sandbox-style freedom designed to immerse players inside a world they build, battle, and destroy.

Fantasy MMOs are nothing new, with many taking the safe approach toward dragons, dungeons, and dwarves. While Ashes of Creation has many traditional elements like questing and dungeon delving, the focus is on dynamic elements that add impact and depth to these activities. Adaptive A.I. ensures that encounters may not play out the same way each time, and massive server quests mean individuals and communities can have a serious impact on the future of the world. Far from the traditional "theme park" experience, player actions and consequences are designed to have lasting results that shape each server into a unique environment unlike any other. Destroy a city to rubble? The land around it may become wild and untamed, allowing much more fearsome creatures to breed.

The reactive world design trickles down into every element. Quest availability can change dramatically as cities rise and fall, offering different opportunities depending on a server's history. Trade caravans present dramatic risk/reward situations, you can attempt to move valuable goods across the world for a big profit – but greedy players may ruin your plans and steal your resources. Crafting, which is often downplayed in modern MMORPGs, is of utmost importance, with skilled crafters able to create valuable player housing features or unique items that can't be found anywhere else.

Player-vs-player interactions are critical. Even if you're not one to typically engage in this kind of activity, the world around you is influenced by warring guilds and factions. Valuable areas like hunting grounds are contested by guilds to gain access to high-quality resources, and castles, cities, and caravan routes are all important holdings to consider. You can certainly lone wolf it in the world, but powerful communities may shape your playground.

The ambitions for Ashes of Creation are sky-high. Offering server-specific experiences, choice and consequence paths, and a giant sandbox for players to forge around their own desires, the Kickstarter project could be a huge breath of fresh air in a genre that relies heavily on safe standbys. Achieving these goals will not be an easy task, but I remain cautiously optimistic about this massive project. » **Daniel Tack**



Traditional dungeon fare is still around, but you never know how dynamic server events can shift things forever

As you build up your character, you're also shaping the world around you

Heroes Of The Storm

Big changes on the horizon

Heroes of the Storm is a continually changing entity that celebrates all of Blizzard's IPs under one roof. Having just added the support dragon Alexstrasza to its ever-growing roster of characters, future updates are bringing one of Overwatch's more infamous characters to the fray and making many significant design changes to the overall game.

Hanzo is one of many Overwatch heroes to blaze the trail over to Heroes of the Storm. Like the others, he retains his signature skillset from the shooter, but seeing how those abilities translate to the MOBA-esque experience is always interesting. Of note are his Scatter Arrow and Sonic Arrow skills.

Scatter Arrow connects with the terrain and structures, splits off and ricochets. While that skill is cool behind the bow when playing Overwatch, it takes on all kinds of new utility here as players must now examine their environment with Hanzo around and not try to get caught in a tight space where an arrow could turn into a cluster barrage. Skilled players can use the Scatter Arrow to hit "trick shots" off various map elements that make for wild and watchable moments.

Sonic Arrow can be used to circumvent the fog of war, allowing Hanzo and his team to get the drop on skulking foes or gain valuable information about a contested objective before moving in. Hanzo also still has access to his signature twin-dragon ultimate that can deal devastating damage to a bunched-up team – just like in Overwatch.

Aside from new heroes, the 2018 game update comes with a slew of significant changes. Stealth is being completely reworked. Currently, stealth is difficult to deal with and somewhat overpowered against novice to mid-range players, but almost useless against the trained eye of a veteran player. The stealth revamp should make stealth characters easier to see for all players, but offer tradeoffs in terms of power and skills.

While Blizzard plans to leave the game length unchanged, its focus is on making the early game more impactful in 2018. Players will be rewarded more during the opening "laning" phase before things turn into the team-battle objective. Changes are also coming to mercenary camps. While the standard siege minions are still going to be around, new mercenary types that encourage players to push with them are being added to the game, which will work as a stark contrast to current minions that can encourage a "fire-and-forget" approach.

Heroes of the Storm continues to change and grow after its landmark 2.0 rollout, embracing the Blizzard brand in fun and creative ways. The real question is, when will we finally get to play as Deckard Cain, Blackthorne, or a Rock'n'Roll racer? » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
10-Player MOBA

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

New mercenaries encourage players to band up for assaults

A stealth rework aims to improve the mechanic

reviews

A Village Burns

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

90 Hand Of Fate 2

Defiant Development's sequel to Hand of Fate is a unique blend of card collecting and combat, and offers a stacked deck chock full of upgrades over the original. Pilot your character through an ever-changing adventure where the next mystery lies beneath a flipped card, roll of the dice, or a spin of the wheel...

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	The impending waterfall of hardcore "porgography."

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

SUPER MARIO™

Power up your home decor!

Bring some Super Mario fandom home with these exclusive lamps.

TM & © 2017 ® Nintendo.

COOL STUFF AND COLLECTIBLES FOR GAMING, SCI-FI & MORE.
Shop online or find a location near you at **thinkgeek.com/locations**

THINKGEEK®
JOIN IN. GEEK OUT.®

Star Wars Battlefront II

The dark side of gaming

6.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Answering the call for more content, Star Wars Battlefront II offers a full campaign and more than enough multiplayer material, but the entire experience is brought down by Star Cards and the specter of formerly available microtransactions

» **Graphics**
One of the best-looking games to date, soaring both in the little details and the immense scale of war

» **Sound**
Star Wars' iconic music is once again used to great effect to up the intensity of battle. The voice work is also quite good, especially for Han Solo

» **Playability**
The new class-based system works well, empowering players with a variety of satisfying ways to approach the opposition. Space combat is vastly improved

» **Entertainment**
A thrilling Star Wars moment can end up feeling gross when you're reminded of the microtransactions and Star Cards mid-match

» **Replay Value**
High

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (40-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** DICE, Motive Studios, Criterion Software **Release** November 17 **Rating** T

Sirens roar ominously within the mangled remains of a Rebel frigate, warning all to escape. The clanking of hurried footsteps echoes through the halls before being replaced by a series of ghastly screams, loud enough to drown out the alarm. A door slides open to reveal the glow of a red lightsaber backed by the silhouette of Darth Vader. I fire my blaster, and he nonchalantly takes a shot to the chest. He raises his hand and I levitate with it, my throat closing as I inch upward. This spectacle of power is impressive, but as my life fades away, the only thing I can think is, "How much did that player spend to unlock the third level of Punishing Grip?"

Star Wars Battlefront II is big, bombastic, and fun. During its first week, it was also diseased by an insidious microtransaction model that created an uneven battlefield, favoring those willing to spend real money to gain an edge over players who are just here to enjoy the Star Wars experience.

On the eve of Battlefront II's official retail release, EA temporarily removed the ability to buy loot crates with real money, following immense fan backlash. This only solved part of the problem, as the progression system remains unaltered, and the pay-to-win element still lingers. Players who either played the 10-hour trial or purchased the Deluxe edition got a significant head start on playing, and could have taken advantage of the pay-to-win model.

Given just how slowly in-game currency is doled out, the notion of keeping up through extensive grinding isn't realistic. This is especially true of Star Cards, which unlock new abilities, boosts, and upgrades for each class and hero, since they are tucked away in expensive loot crates or eat up rare crafting materials (which you mostly get in crates).

The benefits of the Star Cards range from slight bumps like explosive-damage protection increasing from 15 percent to 17.5 percent, to game-changers like a boost that increases the rate Battle Points are earned by 20 percent. This is a huge deal, as Battle Points allow players to control vehicles and heroes that rack up kills and turn the tide of war. With each death on the battlefield, players see which cards their opponent is using – a design that plants the seed of "I need those cards."

Even if a player spends a day playing the game to earn credits to buy a couple of crates, they may walk away with unwanted things like emotes or victory poses rather than cards that help their cause. The same currency is also used to unlock heroes like Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker – a frustrating conflict of goods that makes progress feel endless and hopeless.

The most damning way Battlefront II impedes your progress is by putting a limit on the number of credits a player can earn in Arcade mode. After finishing five Arcade challenges, the player is told to come back in 14 hours to earn more. This is the kind of gating that makes certain free-to-play games nearly unplayable, yet here it is in a major full-fledged release. While it no longer pushes to spend real money, it still slows progress.

If all of the microtransaction nonsense were stripped away completely (EA has stated it will come back in the future after changes have been made to the game), Battlefront II has all of the makings of a great multiplayer experience. With maps spanning 40 years of the Star Wars saga, I had a blast suiting up as a stormtrooper on Tatooine, piloting an X-Wing in the debris of a Death Star, and marching defiantly into Theed's palace as Darth Maul. The 40-player Galactic Conquest matches are a bombardment of spectacle and awe, delivering a true Star Wars experience backed by excellent gunplay and photo-realistic imagery.

These battles are brilliantly devised, making most matches feel like the team is functioning as a united front, all while allowing each player to approach the battle with whatever class, vehicle, or hero they want. The maps funnel the action admirably, offering a nice variety in objectives, and chokepoints where glorious chaos ensues. The previous Battlefront's problem of not having enough maps is not an issue here. Battlefront II has plenty, but I'm not a fan of back-to-back matches taking place on the same map, even if you do get to experience it from the other side.

I enjoyed all of the maps almost equally, another testament to the game's potential for greatness. The tall grass affecting sight lines on Kashyyyk is quite cool, and I also love the how the wars clash against Kamino's muted colors. The same praise of how the maps can elevate the wars extends to the other avenues of play like Strikes and Heroes vs. Villains.

As enthralling as the gunplay is (and boy do these weapons pack a punch), my favorite part of the game is Starfighter Assault. The excitement of Star Wars dogfighting is captured beautifully here, allowing players to weave dangerously in and out of debris, skim along the surface of star destroyers, and lock-on to a foe to unleash a satisfying torpedo strike. Again, the visualization of these battles is nothing short of breathtaking – Battlefront II is easily one of the best-looking games out there.

The single-player campaign is the one area where the Star Wars fantasy falls flat. The story starts off on a strong note, giving players a taste of what it's like to be an Imperial officer (I had to train myself not to instinctively shoot stormtroopers). This dark perspective unfolds through Iden Versio, a skilled pilot who is immediately likeable and different, and appears to be a great guide into the unknown for Star Wars fans.

Just when it seems the story is going to embrace the darkness, it alters course completely and loses its pulse, becoming both predicable and sloppy. Iden's tale is upended further by levels that play out like a greatest hits of Star Wars heroes. Slashing giant bugs as Luke is good fun, but Iden's tale suffers from it. The highlight of the story is a tease in the final seconds that establishes a legitimate villain (something that is oddly missing up to that point).

The dark side courses through Star Wars Battlefront II. By the time you read this review, there's a chance EA may change how the Star Cards or loot crates work even further, or the predatory microtransactions may return to help accelerate progress again. It's a shame to see a game with such clear greatness get pulled down to these depths. Star Wars deserves better. We deserve better. » **Andrew Reiner**

Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2

A marvelous mess

6

Style 1 to 4-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** TT Games **Release** November 14 **Rating** E10+

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Assemble another massive roster of Marvel heroes in an all-new, time-bending adventure

» Graphics
One of the best-looking Lego games yet, with visuals that perfectly capture the silly essence of TT Games' take on Lego

» Sound
This is silly, pulpy stuff, and the actors have a ball with the material. The sound mix is off, as usual, with lines and music cues that are often too loud or too quiet

» Playability
With frequent game-breaking bugs and glitches marring every session I played, this is the least polished Lego game I have played

» Entertainment
Despite a fun core of a game, rampant technical issues make it impossible to recommend

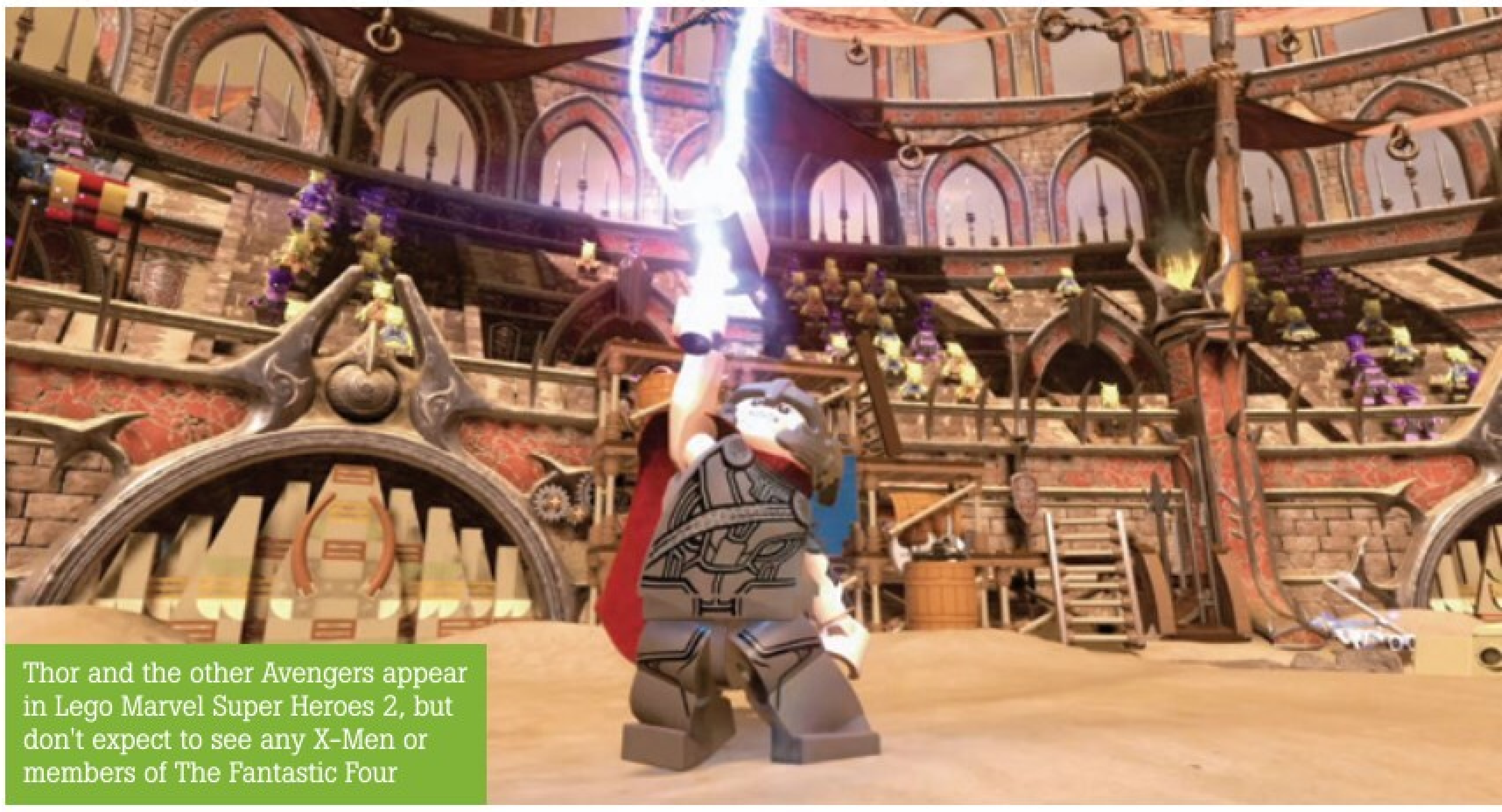
» Replay Value
High

TT Games has released a slew of Lego games over the past dozen or so years, but Lego Marvel Super Heroes was easily my favorite. It had a massive roster of powerful heroes and an equally sizable hub world for them to explore. The sequel builds upon that solid framework, but stumbles on the execution. The pieces of a great game are here, but they're shattered by near-constant bugs, glitches, and technical issues.

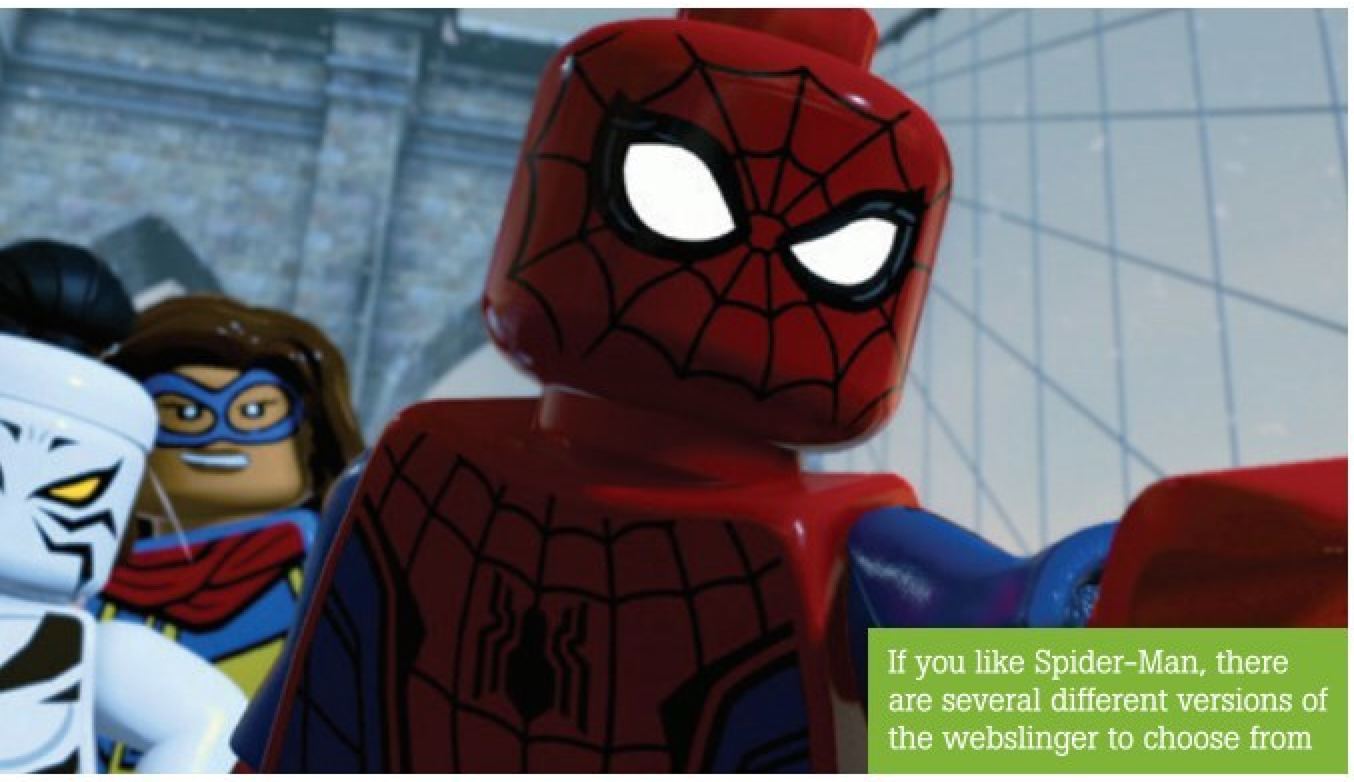
The situation is frustrating, since so many components are in place. The campaign, in which our heroes have to stop Kang the Conqueror and his time-manipulating ways, has some of the funniest writing that Lego games have seen, and the sight gags are similarly top-tier. The minifig heroes are animated with such care and so many little visual flourishes that it's hard not to be impressed – from the way that Tony Stark's Iron Man suit seemingly has a mind of its own to Hit-Monkey's hyperactive simian lope.

The X-Men and Fantastic Four didn't make it to the sequel for whatever reason, but I didn't miss them too much. In some ways, their omission made room for TT Games to take even deeper dives into Marvel's archives for the 200-plus characters on the roster. You may not get Wolverine, but Cap-Wolf is here, and he brought a host of similarly tiered heroes. The goofiness is a delightful change of pace from getting more of the same Spider-Man, Thor, and Hulk we've come to expect from Marvel games, and I couldn't wait to see who'd be the next obscure unlock.

Each hero has his or her special arsenal of attacks and abilities, and returning players know that means a fair bit of swapping out your team to solve basic puzzles. TT Games made it easier than ever by pulling context-appropriate heroes from your roster with the press of a button. Say you're using Peter-Porker (The Spectacular Spider-Ham) and you find a gold brick that requires an energy beam to melt. Sorting through the vast array of heroes might be daunting, but holding the character-select button opens up the screen with an appropriate hero, such as Iron Man, highlighted. It's a little detail that makes completing objectives far more efficient. Considering how much there is to do in Chronopolis, it's a huge relief.



Thor and the other Avengers appear in Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2, but don't expect to see any X-Men or members of The Fantastic Four



If you like Spider-Man, there are several different versions of the webslinger to choose from

Chronopolis itself is probably the biggest highlight. Rather than focus on one familiar location, such as New York City, the campaign's time-traveling setup gave the team an excuse to create what's essentially a massive theme park. The hub world is split into a variety of different eras and locations, such as slices of past, present, and future New York; ancient Egypt; the old west; a Hydra enclave; and more. Once the initial load is done, you can seamlessly zip through each location in the air, on the ground, or even underwater. You find a host of side activities and collectibles along the way, all of varying quality. The side missions are generally fun – or at least funny – and they unlock new characters and silly Gwenpool stages. Driving is terrible, as usual, and I loathed every time I had to race the unresponsive vehicles through rings. Fortunately, unless you're looking to 100-percent the game, you don't have to spend too much time behind the wheel. The open world is tailor made for when you don't want to commit to spending a great deal of time on one particular thing, but want to dart around and make a little bit of progress across a wide spectrum of challenges. You also aren't likely to lose as much progress as you would in a story mission when technical snafus pop up, either.

Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2 has a lot to like, but unfortunately the whole package is marred by a shocking lack of polish. I've come to expect a few bugs scattered throughout a Lego game at this point, but it's never been anything like this. Without hyperbole, every session I've had with the game has ended not because I was ready to take a break, but because another game-ending glitch popped up. The character-select screen refused to go away, obscuring the gameplay screen. The main map has stopped functioning. Characters have routinely gotten irrevocably stuck on geometry or trapped in endless death cycles. A rescued Stan Lee blinked out of existence without giving a reward. A.I. controlled characters have mysteriously transformed without my intervention.

Taken individually, these are all annoying. When they come at such a frequent and relentless pace, I can't ignore them. This is a game aimed at children and younger players, and I imagine that far too many of them will think they're doing something wrong when a boss battle doesn't end – not realizing that the trigger to activate the next battle phase didn't flip for some unknown reason. Perhaps a patch will come and address these issues. Unfortunately, it's not here yet and I have to review the game in its current state. As it stands, I can't recommend it to anyone, no matter how deep their love for Lego, Marvel, or past glories from TT Games.

» Jeff Cork

Battle Chef Brigade

A tasty treat for puzzle fans

Style 1-Player Action/Puzzle **Publisher** Adult Swim Games **Developer** Trinket Studios **Release** November 20 **Rating** E10+

Battle Chef Brigade is a weird, delightful, and at times intense match-three cooking game that also pushes players to hunt for ingredients through fervent hack-and-slash combat. This strange hybrid of genres works surprisingly well, as both push for speed and precision. One botched combat encounter or poorly placed ingredient could spell disaster.

Obvious inspiration is drawn from the *Iron Chef* cooking show, complete with an animated host who reveals the competition's primary ingredient, and an array of snooty judges who demand different things from your cooking. The game is also wildly imaginative; it's set in a kingdom called Victusia where monsters are kept at bay by a legion of magic-wielding cooks. Again, this strange union of ideas works, and is used to create an engaging backdrop for players.

Our guide through Victusia is a young, aspiring cook named Mina, who is upbeat and joyous, and doesn't seem like she's done or said anything bad in her life. When we first meet her, she's trapped as a cook at her family's restaurant, forced to make the same dishes day-in and day-out. She knows she has talent, and is destined for something far greater, so she runs away to Brigade Town to enter a cooking competition to become the next Brigadier and protector of the world. This story is narrow in scope and you know exactly how it's going to conclude, but is fun to follow thanks a wild ensemble of supporting characters, including a two-headed Cyclops and a rival cook who uses the undead to help him gather ingredients.

Brigade Town has all of the makings of a hub in an RPG, allowing Mina to purchase new cooking wares from shops, take on side jobs to make more money, and interact with the locals to learn more about the world. While giving the game a bit of character, these side activities don't last long, and all funnel into the big cooking competitions, in which Mina squares off against an opponent.

When the secret ingredient is revealed, the two contestants run in different directions, past their kitchens, and into the wilderness where they must hunt. The combat mechanics have depth – such as punching combos, aerial maneuvers, ground bounces, projectiles, and magic – but don't offer much in terms of challenge or strategy. A dragon may have more hit points than a bird, but can be exploited easily. While I felt the stress of the clock pushing me to perform as flawlessly as possible, I felt like I was going through the same motions for all encounters. The only moments of intrigue come from a creature grabbing a slab of meat before you can, which leads to a chase, or waiting for a bird to lay an egg – which is a nice ingredient to add, but takes time to produce.

With a satchel full of supplies, Mina races back to the kitchen to prepare them. At first, you are just working with one dish, but you eventually need to cook for three judges at once. The pans you use are like weapons in traditional RPGs, and embrace player choice. For a certain judge that likes watery dishes, you may want to use a pan in which you only have to match two water gems instead of three. You may also want to use a slow cooker that increases the taste of a gem over time. Plenty of variety is offered in the utensils and sauces to enhance taste and add even more variety to the cooking.

The matching gameplay takes place on an incredibly small 4x4 grid, yet offers plenty of variety, strategy, and chaos. Matching three in such a confined area can be tricky, especially since some gems are too fragile to be moved, or may pollute others. You also need to bring out specific flavors, and each ingredient contains different elements (water, earth, fire, bones, poisons, and delicate materials). If a dish is missing something, a frantic race back into the wilderness is likely in the cards. As a dish is prepared, it takes shape and is shown a rating, giving you an idea of whether it's good or not. However, the judge may have other things to say and lower the score if it doesn't hit the right notes.

Battle Chef Bridge is breezy and fun, offering roughly 10 hours of stressful cooking with a decent narrative and beautiful pastel visuals to pull it along. It may seem lighthearted and innocent, but it succeeds more in being overly chaotic in its gameplay.

» Andrew Reiner

This review pertains to the Switch version of Battle Chef Brigade. The game is also available on PC

8.25

Switch • PC

» Concept
Hack-and-slash combat meets match-three cooking in a whimsical, story-driven adventure

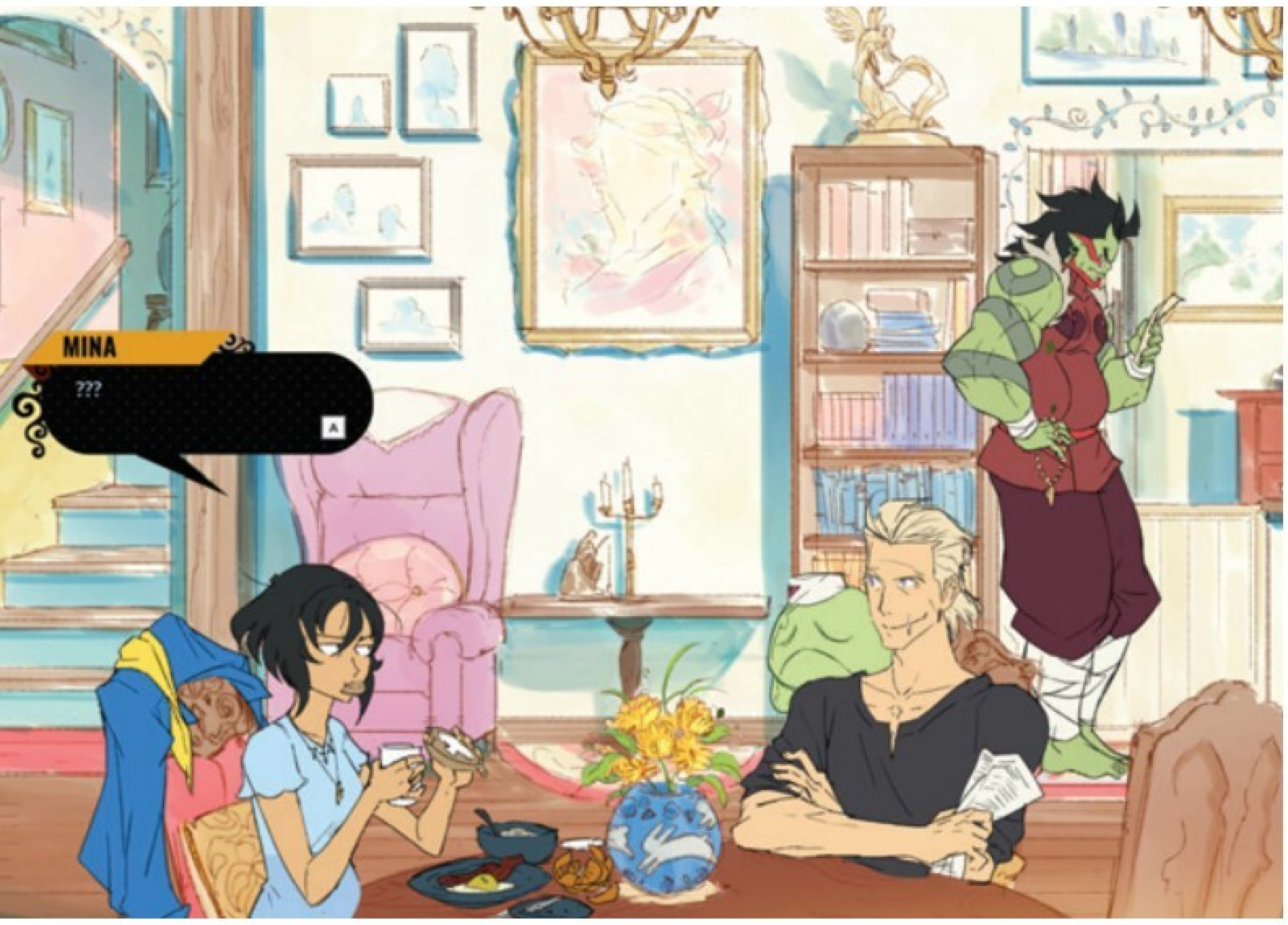
» Graphics
Colorful character designs and a pastel world create a magical place for players to explore. The match-three colors are also easy to distinguish

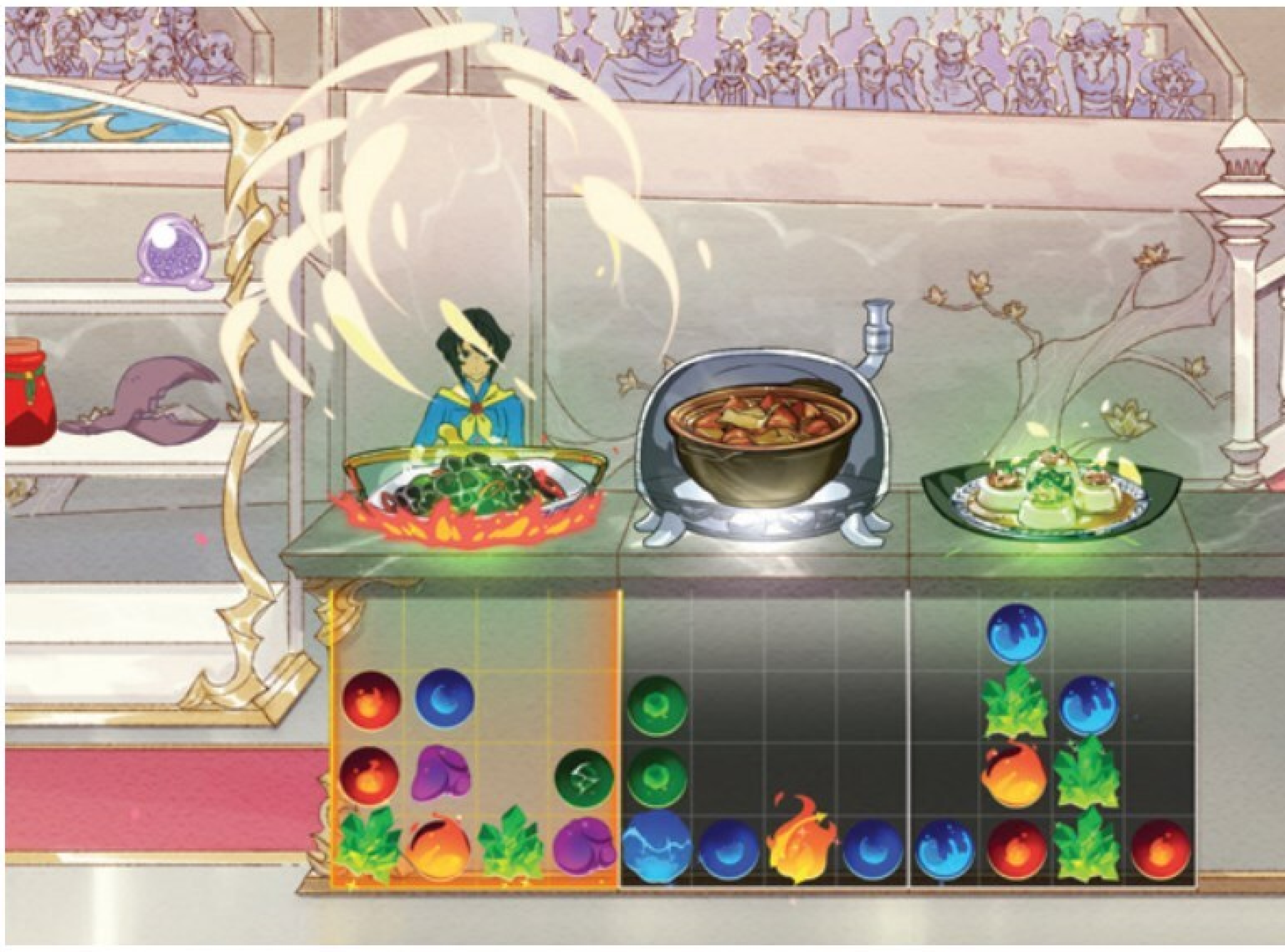
» Sound
The spoken dialogue is overly dramatic by design, which matches the goofy tone

» Playability
Combat encounters all play out the same, but the hunt for specific materials is fun. The cooking is the heart of the game, offering intense match-three sequences where every second counts

» Entertainment
Battle Chef Brigade is a nice treat, but the intensity of the cooking may make you want to pull out your hair

» Replay Value
Moderate





Need For Speed Payback

A risky bet

6

Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Ghost Games **Release** November 10 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Take back the streets for the perfectly innocent illegal street racers you call friends

» Graphics
A beautiful southwest setting is the game's best feature, but pop-up and U.I. problems have disastrous consequences on race integrity

» Sound
A cavalcade of cringe-inducing characters and dialogue is accompanied by a licensed soundtrack with nearly 50 songs. Oddly, a few of those songs trigger more frequently than the others, making the list seem much shorter

» Playability
Arcade race controls are barely adequate for the task, and don't successfully provide a satisfying sense of mastery over time

» Entertainment
This open world has plenty of racing content, but bad progression, technical problems, and throwaway storytelling make it hard to get invested

» Replay Value
Low

Need For Speed has repeatedly attempted to reinvent itself, trying out new twists within the arcade-racing milieu to stay fresh after 20 years of releases. In pursuit of that novelty, Payback throws an enormous array of activities at the wall to see what might stick, including car customization, police chases, drifting, collectibles, offroad jumps, blink-and-you-miss-them drag races, and supercar highway sprints. The sheer scope of activities is impressive at first, but consistent technical problems, hackneyed storytelling, uneven balancing, and a wildly frustrating progression system all combine to sap the fun. Payback is like being behind the wheel of a riding mower as you cut the lawn of a beautiful estate; it may be pretty and have lots to look at, but it's still a tedious chore.

Tyler Morgan and his crew have been betrayed, and they're out for revenge against the nebulous threat of "The House," a shady organization that runs the Need For Speed analog of Las Vegas. With each new stereotypical character intro, plot beat, and dialogue line, the vapid storytelling made me wince a little more, right up until the unfulfilling and anticlimactic ending. After "crushing it" and "doing it for the streets" with "drifting anarchist hackers" for several dozen hours, I found myself longing for the nuanced scripting of a Jason Statham film.

On the bright side, the open world of Payback captures the stark beauty of the southwest United States, with the glitzy trash of Vegas, the sprawling deserts of Nevada, and the jagged rocks of southern Utah. The open world has plenty of billboards to smash through, switchback roads to drift along, and secret collectibles to track down. Tons of events, races, and activities can be tackled around the map, and I appreciate the breadth of content, even if some of the races feel like copies of events I already completed.

The cars you drive through these attractive settings are varied and cool to look at. Modding your car's visual style is versatile, but never feels especially meaningful or worth the time and money. It's too bad that the derelict car system is so tiresome. Ostensibly, it's built to let you find the parts to an old car and rebuild it into a monster. In practice, between collecting parts from cryptic road maps, rebuilding the vehicles, and upgrading them, these versatile rides end up feeling like they're simply not worth the ample effort required to make them viable competitors.

No matter the vehicle, I struggled to enjoy the feel of the rubber against the road, or to really recognize how any one car in a given class was different from another. Handling across all the car types is often loose and vaguely out of my control. Drifting is oversimplified and imprecise. Police chases don't have the urgency and challenge of earlier franchise entries. Until the late game, street races lack the speed and control that can make a game like this feel tense.

Payback's greatest sin is its infuriating progression mechanics. In what I can only presume is an effort to extend the life of the game and encourage engagement with the microtransaction system, improving the performance of your rides is a slow and poorly paced process. Instead of giving you clear control over how to make a car better, you're forced into a strange confluence of currencies, speed cards, spare parts, and numerical values. Growth is tied to random improvements on sale at any given time at the tune-up shop, along with a literal slot-machine mechanic – all of which tie back to currencies obtainable through real-world purchases.

The further into the game you go, the longer it takes to reach the next story event's power threshold. The result is you either invest time grinding or spending real money multiple times to get up to snuff, or alternately feel consistently underpowered in every race you enter. And this must be done with multiple car types, not just one, since offroad, drift, drag, race, and runner vehicles all have separate upgrade paths. The problem is exacerbated by wildly uneven balancing and rubber banding during events, teetering back and forth from too easy to too hard, so you never really know when you're ready to move on and tackle a task.

Technical problems also crater the game's potential. U.I. fails to load immediately after an in-race cinematic sequence or crash, leaving you facing crucial seconds with no navigational aid. Distant objects (like turn warnings and enemy racers) have occasional pop-in problems. Load times are weirdly long. Opponent A.I. acts wonky, sometimes veering into siderails for no reason. Mini-map navigation often sends you along unnecessarily complex routes, rather than recognizing simpler paths to an objective.

Multiplayer lets you take on opponents in ranked or unranked playlists. The online battles are passable, but opponent cars regularly fail to load in at race start, leading to a bumper-car-like scrum with invisible foes in the opening frantic seconds. After that, the online races can be enjoyable, but marred by matchmaking that struggles to find a good match of players. And when I ran up against a particularly tricked-out competitor, I couldn't escape the suspicion that someone had simply paid their way into a winning position.

Scattered across its unnaturally lengthy campaign, Payback has several fun event sequences that blend cinematic action with rousing racing. And as players begin to control more sophisticated cars, the sense of excitement and speed can be engaging. Unfortunately, too much of the rest of the game feels lackluster, unpolished, and catered to other priorities besides fun. Payback hits a lot of the checkpoints on a bullet list for a big modern racing adventure, but lacks the discipline and execution to come in for anything but a disappointing finish. » **Matt Miller**

The most enjoyable activities in the game are cinematic-style events, but they are too few and separated by many dozens of smaller less exciting races

Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds

New mysteries in a familiar world

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Guerrilla Games **Release** November 7 **Rating** T

Horizon Zero Dawn is already one of the best games of 2017 thanks to a gorgeous open world, pitch-perfect combat (against robot dinosaurs!), and an enticing mystery. Even though Horizon's ending answered all of the questions surrounding Aloy's past, players still want more of the intriguing post-apocalyptic world she inhabits – and Guerrilla is all too happy to oblige. Just in time for winter, The Frozen Wilds introduces a large snowy region, along with new secrets to uncover and mechanical beasts to slay. While not a massive or vital expansion, The Frozen Wilds provides a welcome reason to delve back into the hunt.

The Frozen Wilds seamlessly slots into Aloy's journey, opening up a sizable new region in the northeast corner of the map. This area is home to the Banuk, the isolated and nomadic tribe that strikes a balance between hunting the world's robotic animals (like everyone else in the game) and revering them. The Banuk didn't get a lot of screen time in the base game, and The Frozen Wilds shines a spotlight on what turns out to be the most interesting faction in the series.

Upon entering the region, Aloy is immediately ensnared in the Banuk's plight; new breeds of stronger machines are emanating from an ominous mountain known as Thunder's Drum, and the tribe's attempt to take it back has ended in heavy losses. Aloy takes it upon herself to find out what's happening inside the mountain, and while it has some loose ties to the main narrative, The Frozen Wilds mostly contains its own mysteries and lore. The core story missions aren't particularly long (you embark on about a half-dozen missions), but they take you on a well-paced narrative, and new acquaintances like the tribal chieftain Aratak and the machine-communing shaman Ourea defy common character tropes. Aloy's allies are also better integrated into the gameplay, accompanying her on several missions and evolving with the story.

The Frozen Wilds' side missions and errands are also worth undertaking, and offer better rewards than in the main game. By helping out various Banuk tribe members, you can attain new outfits and weapons, including the flamethrower-like forgefire and electricity-spewing stormslinger. A separate side-quest chain allows you to upgrade these new weapons into formidable tools of destruction; the forgefire in particular can quickly melt through the HP bars of enemies if you're brave enough to stand toe-to-toe with them, and an alternate attack allows you to lob fireballs from a distance. Even without the rewards, I was once again compelled to track down and read all of the collectible data files, a testament to Guerrilla's expertise in world-building.

Guerrilla also succeeds in creating a visually stunning locale to explore. What The Frozen Wilds lacks in environmental variety (I hope you like snow) it makes up for in focus. You can practically feel the chill of the inhospitable snowscapes Aloy explores, which reverberates in the Banuk's culture and their struggle for survival. You also discover a few more geographic landmarks which root Horizon in the real world, another fun aspect that drove exploration in the main game.

Unfortunately, you mostly face familiar foes in The Frozen Wilds' new environment. The expansion only introduces two new mechanical beasts: the canine-like scorcher and the bearlike frostclaw (plus a fireclaw variant). A new enemy-buffing tower is also added to the mix, along with tougher "daemonic" versions of the main creatures. The scorcher and frostclaw are formidable additions to the food chain, and offer some great, end-game-worthy showdowns during The Frozen Wilds' story missions. In contrast, the other battles in Horizon's new region feel like more of the same.

The new skill tree is also disappointing. Most of the new abilities are focused on allied machines, which were underused in the main game. However, boring abilities like scavenging supplies while riding a mount, and three(!) skills devoted to machine repair aren't going to change that. A few others skills offer quality-of-life upgrades like more inventory space or the ability to break down mods and resources for cash, but they are all largely inconsequential.

Ultimately, The Frozen Wilds is a welcome addition to Horizon. The mysteries residing in Thunder's Drum may not reach the same heights as the main game, but they are a great reminder of how wonderful and compelling Horizon is. The Frozen Wilds doesn't reinvent Guerrilla's new hit series, but I'll gladly accept the excuse to jump back into Aloy's world. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

8

PS4

» Concept
Explore a frosty new region of Horizon's intriguing world and chase down a few new mysteries

» Graphics
Horizon Zero Dawn was one of the most visually stunning games on PlayStation 4 and that hasn't changed

» Sound
The new voice actors do a good job bringing their characters to life, as does Ashly Burch, reprising her role as Aloy

» Playability
Combat is as satisfying as ever, especially against the new enemy types

» Entertainment
The Frozen Wilds offers a new and condensed mystery that hits most of the same notes players loved about the main game

» Replay Value
Moderate

Doom

Rip and tear to go

8

Style 1-Player Shooter (12-Player Online) **Publisher** Bethesda **Developer** id Software/Panic Button **Release** November 10 **Rating** M

Switch

» **Concept**
Improbably port the fantastic 2016 first-person shooter to Nintendo's latest console

» **Graphics**
Muddy textures, lower resolution, and slower framerates are the necessary concessions to get this game running on a Switch

» **Sound**
Mick Gordon's thrashing metal soundtrack is the perfect complement to the relentless action

» **Playability**
The Joy-Con controller configuration is not ideal for shooters. I recommend getting a Pro Controller

» **Entertainment**
One year after release, Doom's campaign is still one of the generation's best

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

One of the internet's many running jokes is seeing how many devices people can get to run the original Doom. We've seen intrepid coders port the world's first blockbuster first-person shooter to iPods, printers, and even ATMs. While most any modern device can be jerry-rigged to run that 1993 classic, the fantastic 2016 reboot takes considerably more horsepower. That didn't stop developers id Software and Panic Button from creating a surprisingly competent port for Nintendo's console/handheld hybrid, though the Switch's limited technical capabilities make this version of Doom the least impressive of the bunch.

To get this game up and running, the teams had to make some clear performance concessions. The framerate is 30 frames per second (compared to 60 in other versions), and the resolution supposedly tops out at 720p, though I have a hard time believing the game even reaches that modest crest. Textures are noticeably muddy nearly everywhere you go, and though motion blur while traversing attempts to mask these shoddy graphics, they stand out like demon blood splattered against the sterile science lab walls. The drop in graphical fidelity becomes even more pronounced when playing on your TV while the Switch is docked, but this is the understandable price you pay for getting a cutting-edge game on a portable console.

If you can look past the technical inferiorities, Doom offers the same great single-player campaign that came to the PS4, Xbox One, and PC last year. Keeping to the form of the original, this action-focused romp is light on narrative beats and heavy on bloodshed. All you need to know is demons have overrun a Mars research facility, and it's your job to paint the walls red with their guts. The combat eschews many of the recent FPS conventions, with no cover mechanic, ammo reloads, or speed burst button. Instead, Doomguy must move at breakneck speeds, vaulting and dodging to avoid incoming fire. The best way to survive when your health or ammo is low isn't to hide behind pillars, but instead charge head-first into the ballet of death, ripping through enemies with your chainsaw to create an explosion of ammunition and health packs.

The frantic combat demands deft controls, and the Switch isn't always up to the task. In handheld mode, I find the placement of the right analog stick to be an ergonomic problem. The strange angle I have to bend my thumb to control the stick takes a toll on responsiveness to the point that I wouldn't dare venture into multiplayer matches with this configuration. If you have a Pro Controller, it is the unquestioned way to go. The developers wisely avoided integrating a comprehensive motion control scheme for a game that demands precision; you can shake the right Joy-con to perform a Glory Kill, but that's it.

If you've already played the single-player campaign on another platform, the arcade mode lets you test your skills to see where you rank among the best Doom players. Selecting any level to play, you can choose from the full assortment of weapon mods and ability-enhancing runes before taking to the killing field. Each kill adds to your score tally, with multiplier bonuses and feats of skill earning you extra points. Having run through the campaign twice already, this was my preferred method of play.

Doom includes a fully featured multiplayer mode, including all of the downloadable updates Bethesda added post-release. The speed of play and variety of modes bring to mind classic arena shooters, but none of the expanded content helps the game rise above my original complaint of it feeling generic and dated. The SnapMap user creation tools that shipped with the other versions of the game didn't make the jump to Switch. The mode never became the mod haven id envisioned (most likely due to the design constraints placed on creators), so this isn't a big loss.

Technical limitations make the Switch version the worst way to experience id's fantastic Doom reboot, but the stellar campaign is still there underneath the layers of muddy textures and resolution dips. Despite its less attractive veneer, being able to play such a demanding game on the go is still a strong selling point. » **Matt Bertz**

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

A glorious return

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
Developer Bethesda Game Studios **Release** November 17 **Rating** M

For more than six years, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim has captured the imaginations of countless gamers, with its beautiful and snowy fantastical trappings and seemingly endless side quests. The Switch port of Skyrim is an exciting prospect because it makes an enticing promise that the other console versions don't: being able to play on the go. I was impressed with how the Switch handles this massive RPG, resulting in a competent port that transitions wonderfully to portable play.

For those who haven't played Skyrim yet, the game takes place on the fantastical continent of Tamriel, where humans walk alongside talking lizards and feline merchants. The world is filled with various factions, guilds, and kingdoms vying for control. On paper, that sounds generic, but Skyrim's open-ended design is anything but commonplace. Players explore the world at their own pace, uncovering secret treasures in tombs hidden in mountains or plotting with children to kill an evil orphanage owner. Even a walk through a forest might suddenly be interrupted by a giant spider fighting a dragon. You're given the freedom to do what you want and develop a play style that interests you. This flexibility results in a world that you can actively inhabit, not just wait to be shuttled to the next big story beat.

The biggest question on many fans' minds is whether or not the Switch can handle Skyrim's massive size and propensity for loading those spaces with numerous foes. During my 35-plus hours with the game, my framerate was constantly above 30 FPS and I never encountered a single dip or stutter. Load times were also surprisingly brief in comparison to the original PS3/360 versions, with a one-minute initial load time from main menu to game world, and then brief transitions taking from 4 to 10 seconds. Everything ran smoothly no matter what area I was in, how populated it is, or what activity I was doing. Control functionality is also satisfying, with a pleasant rumble in the Joy-Cons helping capture the pleasurable thunk of combat when you drive an axe into a foe's head.

Bethesda didn't have to make any huge sacrifices to achieve this performance, either. Outside of textures and rough character models (we're talking about a game from 2011), the world of Skyrim looks as stunning as ever. I noticed no fuzziness in either portable mode or on three different HD televisions of various sizes during my playtime. The draw distance is equally impressive; I could make out distant mountains, cities, and landmasses without any fog enshrouding them.

While the lack of mod support for this version is disappointing, the amount of worthwhile content in the core Skyrim experience more than makes up for it. This version also packages all the expansions for the game. The variety of potential activities in Skyrim is maddening and delightful, and the novelty of doing all of this while sitting in a coffee shop or riding to work still hasn't worn off.

My only substantial criticism about this version is the optional console-specific functions feel like gimmicks. You can use motion controls for combat and lockpicking, but both are too unwieldy to be enjoyable. Amiibo functionality rewards you with treasure chests filled with weapons and ingredients for cooking, but you can also get the best Amiibo gear without using the functionality, so it also feels superficial. Ultimately these are optional niggles you don't have to bother with, so feel free to turn them off and forget about them. The problems inherent in the original version of Skyrim are still here, too, including wonky enemy A.I., stiff animations, and bad voice-acting. Some of these issues are part of the game's charm at this point, so being able to play it on the go essentially made those non-issues for me. This is especially true since so many of the bigger problems that plagued earlier releases, like uneven framerate and glitches, are not present in this version.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is one of the best games ever made. Years later, that continues to be the case. This adventure offers a rich world, densely packed with exciting things to do, as well as many occasions for creating lasting memories. I imagine that Skyrim will become a mainstay on my Switch, with multiple playthroughs and characters filling up the save slots before I'm done with it. If you haven't played Skyrim, or you're just looking to return and don't mind exchanging the mods for convenient portability, the Switch version offers up everything that makes this game a stone-cold classic.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

9

Switch

» **Concept**
Return to the snowy, dragon-ridden mountains of Skyrim and save the world – but this time on Nintendo's portable console

» **Graphics**
The Switch version of Skyrim is surprisingly beautiful as long as you don't look too closely at poorly aged textures

» **Sound**
The sounds of your arrows turning a dragon into a pincushion and the stirring orchestral score are fantastic

» **Playability**
Skyrim's interface remains unchanged from the main game, with easy to understand controls and accessibility options that let you tailor the game to your preferences

» **Entertainment**
The Switch version of Skyrim is a well-executed version of a modern classic that you can play on the go, offering the same delights (and minor frustrations) of the original

» **Replay Value**
High

Hand Of Fate 2

Cutting the weak cards out of the deck

8.75

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Defiant Development **Developer** Defiant Development **Release** November 7 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Make your way through encounters fueled by cards, from tavern brawls to festivals to boss battles

» **Graphics**
Dungeons, dice, and other trinkets on the dealer's table set the stage well, though the somewhat generic fantasy imagery on the battlefield detracts from the immersion

» **Sound**
The omnipresent dealer and tabletop portions feature strong narration and powerful interactive tales

» **Playability**
Interactions and options develop over time, so players can easily get into the swing of things from the first adventures

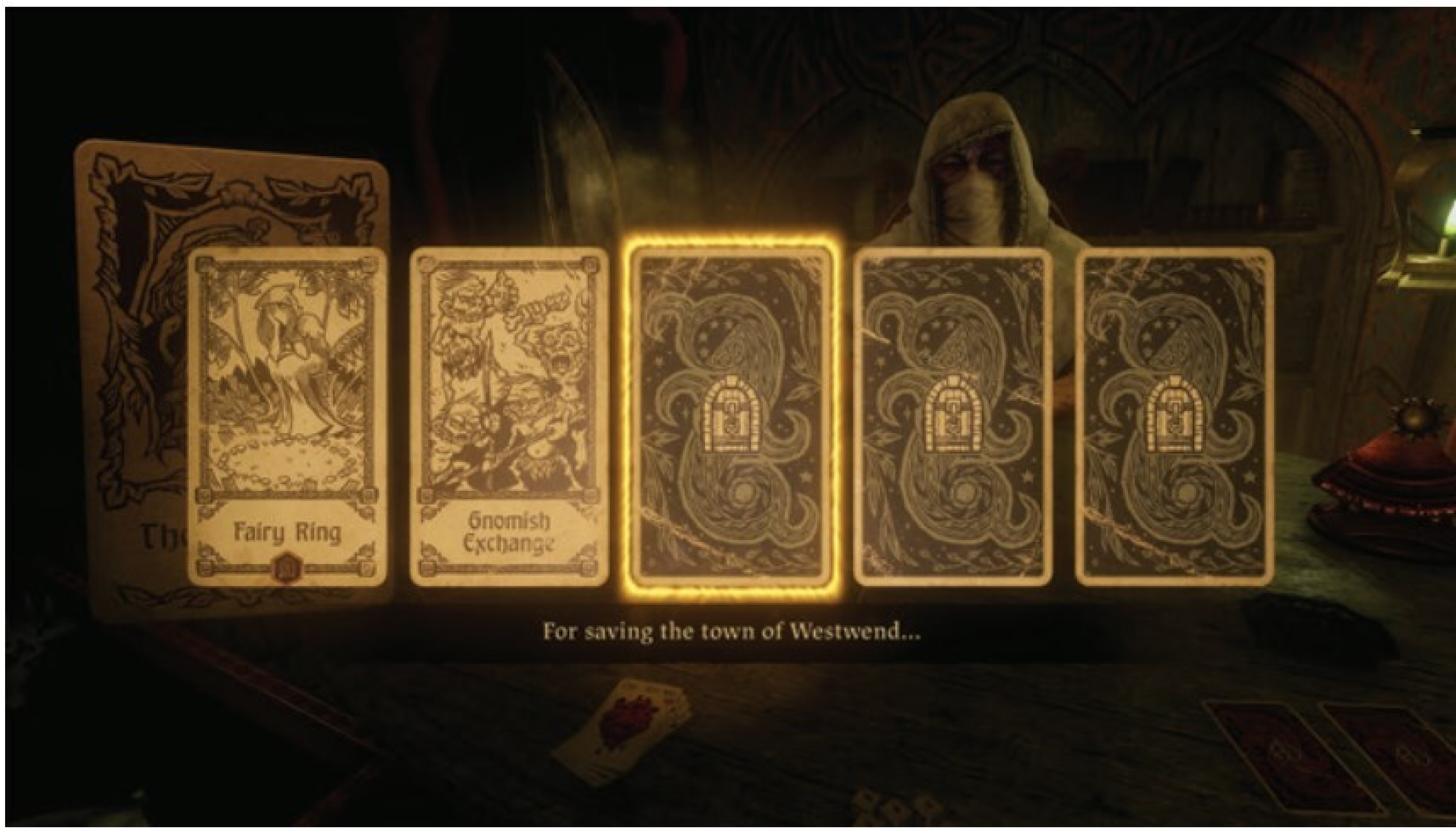
» **Entertainment**
While the combat may drag down the highs a bit, the core experience is a fantastic and unique trek through a card-created fantasy world

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Craft a deck of weapons, armor, trinkets, and encounters and play through a variety of role-playing experiences served up by a mysterious dealer. Don't be fooled – Hand of Fate 2 is not a collectible card game, but rather a distinctive take on the core tabletop experience mixed with a smattering of real-time action battles. The conceit of maneuvering around a tabletop dungeon crafted by cards is a strong, unique twist on the classic action/RPG, and this sequel improves upon almost every feature found in the first game. Low-impact additions like rolling dice or spinning wheels to determine the outcome of a story are interesting, but Hand of Fate 2 also makes big changes, like companion characters that join you in battle and offer their skills and expertise off the battlefield.

Hand of Fate 2 is almost two different games that combine to form a singular experience. In one, you're traveling around a dungeon made up of cards, which could be traps, treasure, tests of character, caves to explore, and more. The other is combat-centric action sequences, which you stumble upon based on your board-game excursions.

Combat is the weakest element in Hand of Fate 2. While it doesn't stray into rote button-mashing madness, elements are flighty and imprecise at times, and the camera often feels like it's working against you. Weapon selection and timing defensive abilities add some nuance, but battle is often boring or laborious. The enemy variety also gets stale around halfway through, so battles take a backseat to the more fun parts, like cobbling together the perfect deck and discovering ways to handle encounters on the card map.

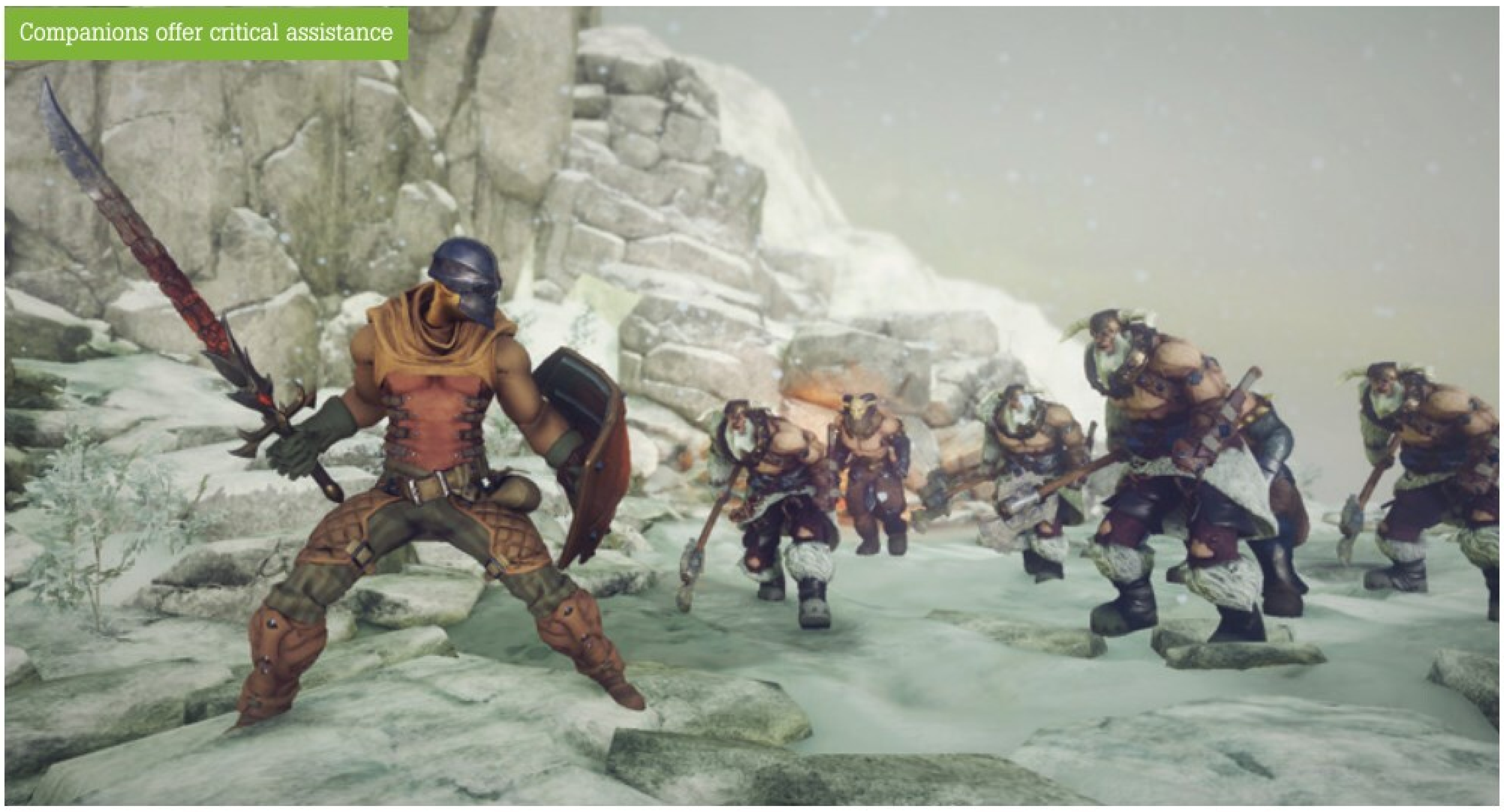


The ever-shifting map of cards steals the show. These travels task you with maneuvering dangerous precipices, participating in a town fair, rescuing (or abandoning!) those in need, discovering hidden treasure, or negotiating a longstanding feud. Myriad scenarios and ways to approach them exist, and tackling the mysteries in different ways gives you incentive to replay areas – or just gives you something else to do if you fail a challenge and need to repeat it several times.

Making your own choices and facing the consequences during these often-dire decisions is enjoyable and you feels like plotting your own personal course to victory. Perhaps you missed a die roll in trying to pick a lock or you decided to get a bit too greedy with a suspicious pile of treasure; you can make a different choice, pick a different card, or roll differently your next time through the area, and maybe even score some new options to include in your deck. Hand of Fate 2's tabletop dungeon crawling is immersive and engaging, and I found myself replaying missions just to check out some of the choices I may have missed. These Dungeons & Dragons-style encounters combined with the baubles, trinkets, and clinking pieces strewn about the card-infused table create a cozy RPG atmosphere that's difficult to match.

Companion characters are awesome, even if they don't fundamentally change the core gameplay. Tap into the barbarian's strength to crush some foes on the battlefield or manipulate perks to subtly influence your experiences during narrative encounters, such as duplicating cards or throwing an extra die to give you an edge against the odds. With four different companions to travel with that range from brute melee assistants to spell-flinging mages, they add plenty of flavor to combat and crawling. You may even find your story (or theirs) being altered by the choices you make along the way.

Hand of Fate was a hidden gem, a Kickstarter surprise that showed us that there was a cool way to mix up an action-RPG with tabletop conventions. The sequel polishes and preens itself into a much more efficient and entertaining entity, and if you can handle some less-than-stellar combat, you find yourself immersed in a spectacular world. » **Daniel Tack**



Companions offer critical assistance

Pokémon Ultra Sun & Ultra Moon

Subtle changes to familiar scenery

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** The Pokémon Company/Nintendo
Developer Game Freak **Release** November 17 **Rating** E

Starting with Pokémon Yellow in 1999, Game Freak has been revisiting its core Pokémon games for follow-ups that tweak the original releases in subtle but interesting ways. Excluding remakes, every generation until Pokémon Black & White received some kind of secondary release. Game Freak seemed to be moving away from this practice, but after Pokémon Sun and Moon became one of the most commercially successful entries in the franchise, it was no surprise to see the developer resurrect the concept. Ultra Sun and Ultra Moon are not new Pokémon games, making them a difficult recommendation to those who already played the 2016 titles, but if you skipped Sun and Moon, this is a fantastic place to jump on.

Ultra Sun and Ultra Moon may not be a sequel to Sun and Moon, but it is more than a straight re-release. The things I liked about Sun and Moon are thankfully all here. The improved controls and animation, the new Trial system that replaces gym-badge collecting, and using Pokémon mounts instead of HMs.

The new additions make Ultra Sun and Ultra Moon feel like a director's cut; entire storylines and characters that did not make it into the original release appear here, and the editing makes certain elements flow differently (and often better). One example is your starter Pokémon – you get it much faster here than you did previously, with less pomp and circumstance to the whole affair. This means you can get to training and fighting faster, with less dialogue setting up the story and world.

Other changes include the new Alola Photo Club mode, which is surprisingly shallow. The mode is discovered about five hours in, and it lets you take photos of yourself and a Pokémon of your choice in assorted poses and cover that photo in stamps. It's cute, and not worth complaining about, but it adds nothing significant to the experience.

Mantine surfing lets you travel between islands by riding on the back of a Mantine, another addition I enjoyed. Again, it's not an explicit reason to play Ultra Sun and Ultra Moon, but this mode is unlike anything that has appeared in a core Pokémon game before. I liked pulling off stunts and riding the waves on my way to new islands.

The other changes are not presented as new standalone modes, but are instead integrated into the total experience. Plenty of new and familiar Pokémon which did not appear in Sun and Moon make an appearance, and your Rotom Pokédex (which is itself a Pokémon capable of speaking) quickly calls out the new creatures he has never seen before when you encounter them. I appreciated these callouts from Rotom, because it made all of those new encounters slightly more exciting.

You also meet the new Ultra Recon Squad on your journey. This robotic pair pops up frequently to comment on your journey, fight, and learn about Pokémon from you, a trainer they have decided is an expert. The Ultra Recon Squad represent the biggest change to the story, so I was always excited to see them. They don't improve or diminish the story in any radical ways, but they do change it up a little.

With Pokémon's confirmed Switch future, Ultra Sun and Ultra Moon could be Pokémon's final core installment on a dedicated handheld system. As a revisiting of the excellent Sun and Moon, it feels like a good note to close the generation on, but if you had your fill with Sun and Moon, don't worry – you aren't missing anything important.

» **Kyle Hilliard**

8.5

3DS

» Concept
Experience a profound sense of déjà vu as you return to Alola to relive your Pokémon Sun and Moon adventures

» Graphics
The visuals have not been changed or upgraded since the original release. The art direction and animation are both some of the best visuals the 3DS has to offer

» Sound
The ukulele-infused versions of familiar Pokémon themes continue to charm

» Playability
The excellent changes to the controls (Grid-based movement is dead!) and improved menu management put in place in Sun and Moon return

» Entertainment
You won't find much incentive to return to Alola if you enjoyed your original trip, but if you skipped Sun and Moon's 2016 release and want to play a new Pokémon game, this is your best bet

» Replay Value
High

5 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim VR

Platform PSVR **Release** November 17 **Rating** M

I don't know how my ranking would pan out if I ordered the different versions of Skyrim, but whatever the list would ultimately look like, the PlayStation VR version would sit at the bottom. – Kyle Hilliard

8 Pinball FX 3

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** September 26 **Rating** E10+

Pinball FX 3 contains a number of welcome additions and improvements, and gives pinball fans what they need most: an excuse to return to and keep replaying all of their favorite tables. – Jeff Marchiafava

SHIRT SHOP
BIG DONUT

6.25 Steven Universe: Save The Light

Platform PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 31 (PS4), November 3 (Xbox One) **Rating** E10+

Without its many technical issues, Save the Light could have been a good video game adaptation of an excellent show. – Kyle Hilliard

7 The Sims 4

Platform PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 17 **Rating** T

Although the console version features some dodgy controls, it largely delivers on its promise of bringing a faithful port to the console audience. – Elise Favis

5.5 Bubsy: The Woolies Strike Back

Platform PS4, PC **Release** October 31 **Rating** E

Bubsy: The Woolies Strike Back underwhelms and disappoints at every turn. Bland level design never improves, and tedious boss battles are unrewarding and unsatisfying. – Brian Shea

6 WWE 2K18

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** October 17 **Rating** T

As it stands, 2K needs to do more to expand its reach beyond the hardcore audience that comes back year after year. – Ben Reeves

6.5 Sonic Forces

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **Release** November 7 **Rating** E10+

3D Sonic games still aren't to where they should be after such a long time of iteration and experimentation, but through improved gameplay and level design, Sonic Forces continues the series' evolution in the right direction. – Brian Shea

5 Oure

Platform PS4 **Release** October 30 **Rating** E

Oure is thoroughly unpleasant. Even if the control scheme was better and everything was more polished, nothing beyond its distinct visuals makes Oure stand out or provide consistent entertainment. – Javy Gwaltney

6.75 Mutant Football League

Platform PC **Release** October 31 **Rating** M

Mutant Football League brings back visions of the over-the-top arcade sports games of yesteryear, but its lack of mode depth makes it tough to recommend to anyone beyond nostalgia seekers. – Matt Bertz

Visit gameinformer.com/mag for the full reviews

gameinformer Volume XXVIII ○ Number 1 ○ Issue 297

STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com
Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com
Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
West Coast News Editor
Imran Khan imrankhan@gameinformer.com
PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Senior Associate Editors
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Associate Editors
Javy Gwaltney javy@gameinformer.com
Elise Favis elisefavis@gameinformer.com
Suriel Vazquez surielvazquez@gameinformer.com
Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com
Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designers
Samm Langer sammlanger@gameinformer.com
Jen Vinson jenifervinson@gameinformer.com

Web Designers/Programmers
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Leo Vader leovader@gameinformer.com
Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Borm rob@gameinformer.com
Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com
Senior Advertising Sales Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com
Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com
Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Castle rachel@gameinformer.com
Mark Burger mark@gameinformer.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE

For renewal, address change and
Power Up Rewards Pro details:

Visit: **www.gameinformer.com**
Email: **customerservice@gameinformer.com**

or send correspondence to:
724 North First St., 3rd Floor
Minneapolis, MN 55401 • Attn: CIS Dept

For subscription inquiry ONLY:
1 (866) 844-GAME (4263)

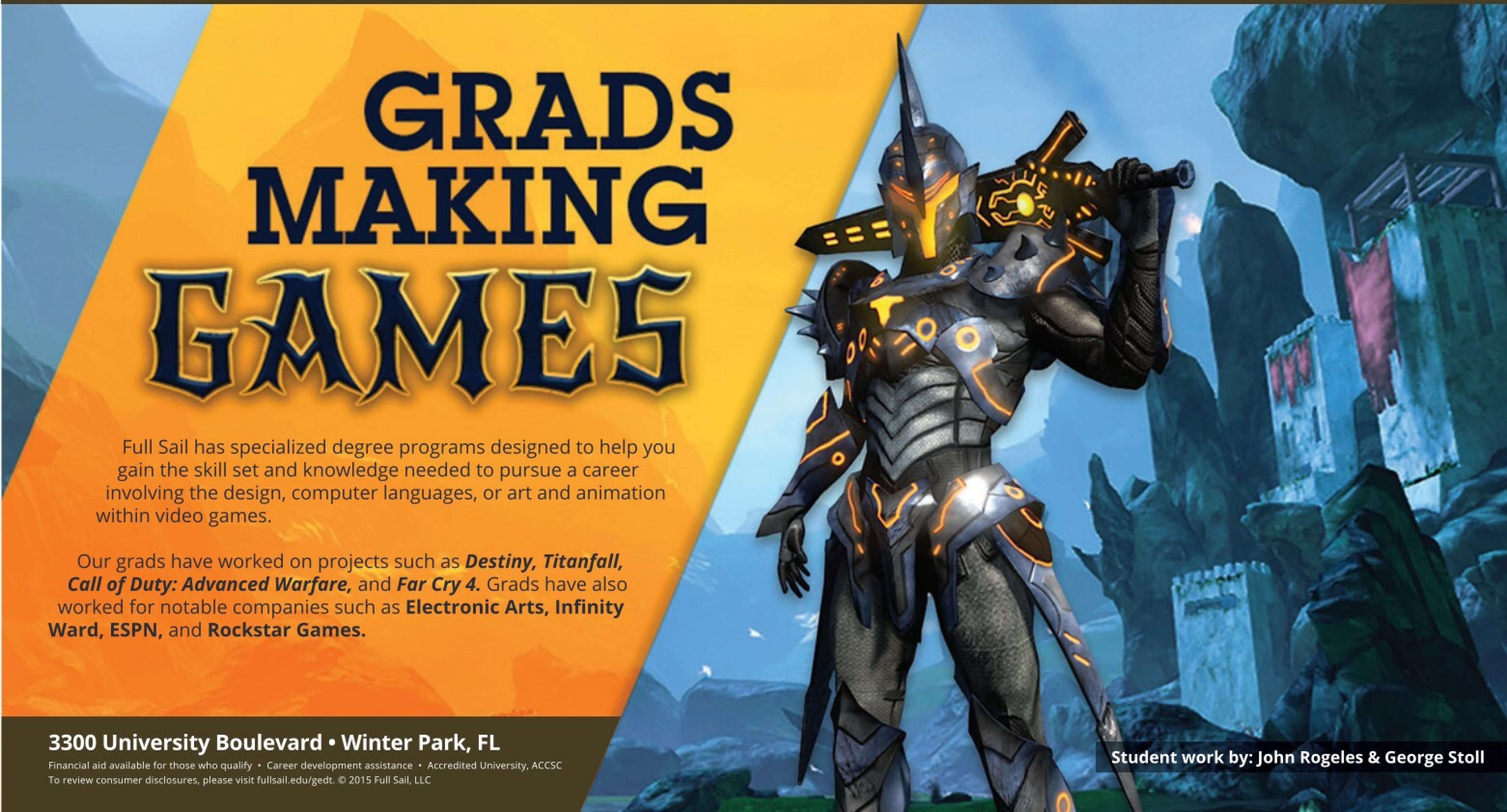
Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer® Magazine, 724 North First St., 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy, resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.

Alliance for Audited Media
The New Audit Bureau of Circulations

USPS Statement of Ownership, Management and Monthly Circulation of
GAME INFORMER (Publication No: 1067-6392)
Published Monthly, 12/year @ $19.98
HEADQUARTERS OF PUBLISHER AND PUBLICATION:
Sunrise Publications, 724 N 1st ST FL 3, Minneapolis, MN, 55401-2885
CATHY PRESTON, *Publisher*
ANDY MCNAMARA, *Editor-in-Chief*
ANDREW REINER, *Executive Editor*
OWNER:
GameStop Corp., 625 Westport Pkwy, Grapevine, TX 76051-3978
STOCKHOLDERS, BONDHOLDERS, MORTGAGE, OTHER SECURITY HOLDERS: *None*

	Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months	Single Issue nearest to filing date
TOTAL NUMBER OF COPIES (Net press run)	*Oct 16 - Sept 17*	*Sept 17*
PAID CIRCULATION	4,777,973	5,567,452
1. Mailed Outside-County Subscriptions	4,483,049	5,263,408
2. Mailed In-County Subscriptions	0	0
3. Distribution Outside the Mails	0	0
4. Other Classes of Mail Through USPS	0	0
TOTAL PAID CIRCULATION	4,483,049	5,263,408
FREE OR NOMINAL RATE DISTRUBUTION		
1. Outside-County Copies	8,349	7,293
2. In-County Copies	0	0
3. Other Classes Through USPS	0	0
4. Distribution Outside the Mail	0	0
TOTAL FREE OR NOMINAL RATE DISTRIBUTION	8,349	7,293
TOTAL DISTRIBUTION	4,491,398	5,270,701
COPIES NOT DISTRIBUTED	286,575	296,751
TOTAL	4,777,973	5,567,452
PERCENT PAID	99.81%	99.86%
ELECTRONIC COPY CIRCULATION		
a. Paid Electronic Copies	1,385,903	1,317,796
b. Total Paid Print Copies + Paid Electronic Copies	5,868,952	6,581,204
c. Total Print Distribution + Paid Electronic Copies	5,877,301	6,588,497
d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies)	99.86%	99.89%

FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY® **800.226.7625** | ***fullsail.edu/gameinformer***

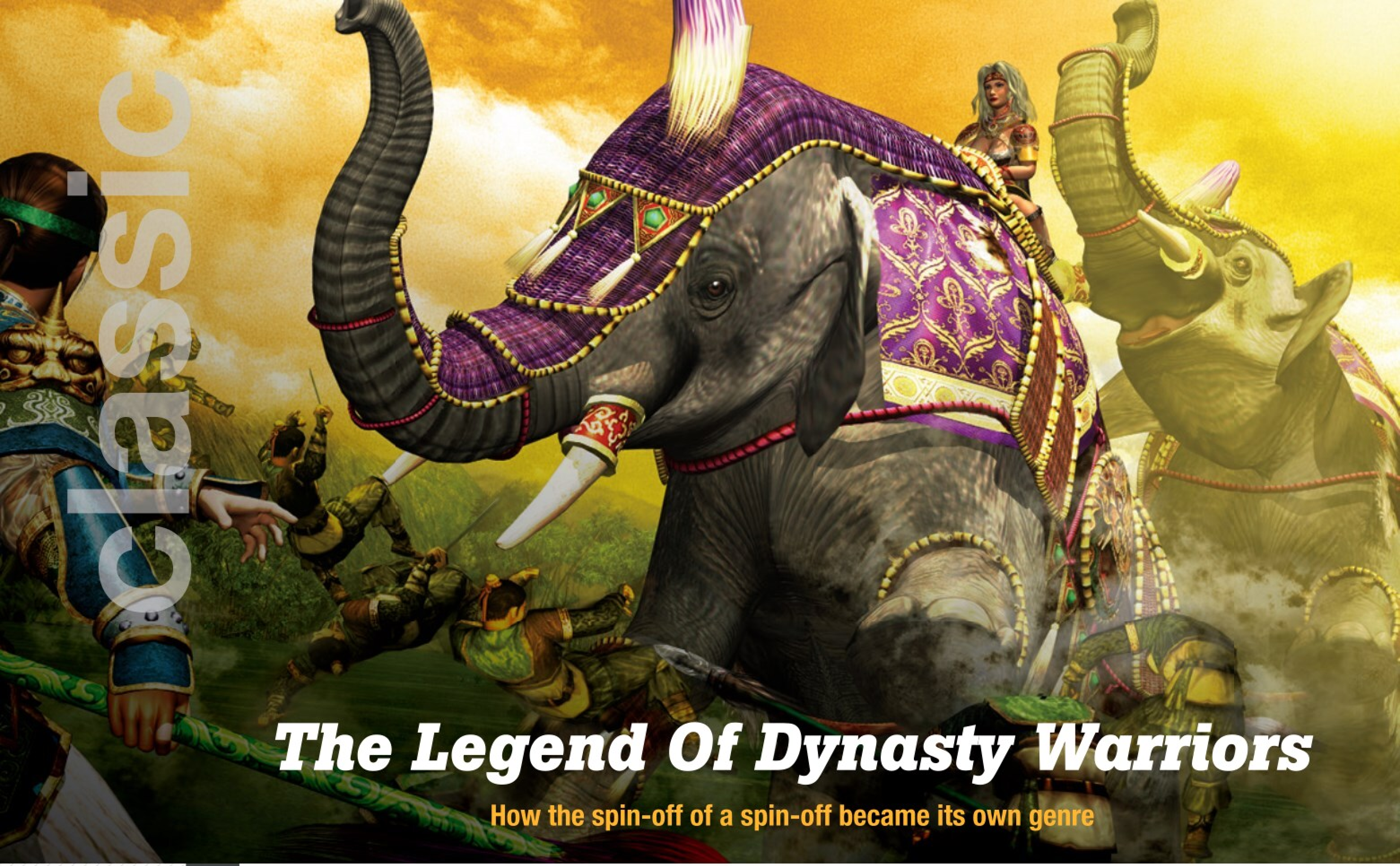


Full Sail has specialized degree programs designed to help you gain the skill set and knowledge needed to pursue a career involving the design, computer languages, or art and animation within video games.

Our grads have worked on projects such as ***Destiny, Titanfall, Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare,*** and ***Far Cry 4.*** Grads have also worked for notable companies such as **Electronic Arts, Infinity Ward, ESPN,** and **Rockstar Games.**

3300 University Boulevard • Winter Park, FL
Financial aid available for those who qualify • Career development assistance • Accredited University, ACCSC
To review consumer disclosures, please visit fullsail.edu/gedt. © 2015 Full Sail, LLC

Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll



The Legend Of Dynasty Warriors

How the spin-off of a spin-off became its own genre

Dynasty Warriors is publisher Koei Tecmo's most popular franchise by a wide margin. During its 20-year lifespan, the series has sold over 22 million copies across its eight core entries and myriad spin-off and follow-up editions. The series basically established its own genre, often referred to as "musou," where a single player takes on a massive army in a large open battlefield. In recent years, series developer Omega Force has adopted its musou approach to huge franchises like The Legend of Zelda, Mobile Suit Gundam, Dragon Quest, and Fire Emblem. Its roots, however, are varied and experimental, with a firm grounding in Chinese history using the historical novel *Records of the Three Kingdoms* as its base.

by Kyle Hilliard

The original Dynasty Warriors, launched on the PlayStation in 1997, was a traditional one-on-one fighting game. A spin-off of the popular turn-based strategy series Romance of the Three Kingdoms, the game featured its historical characters wielding various weaponry. For the second entry Omega Force completely abandoned the fighting genre and invented the template it would use for all the Dynasty Warrior games moving forward. Producer Akihiro Suzuki has been working on the franchise since this entry and recalls the transition. "At first, we tried different designs including an arcade game, but we ultimately went with Koei's strength in historical settings, and selected a beat 'em up fighting game since it was very popular at the time."

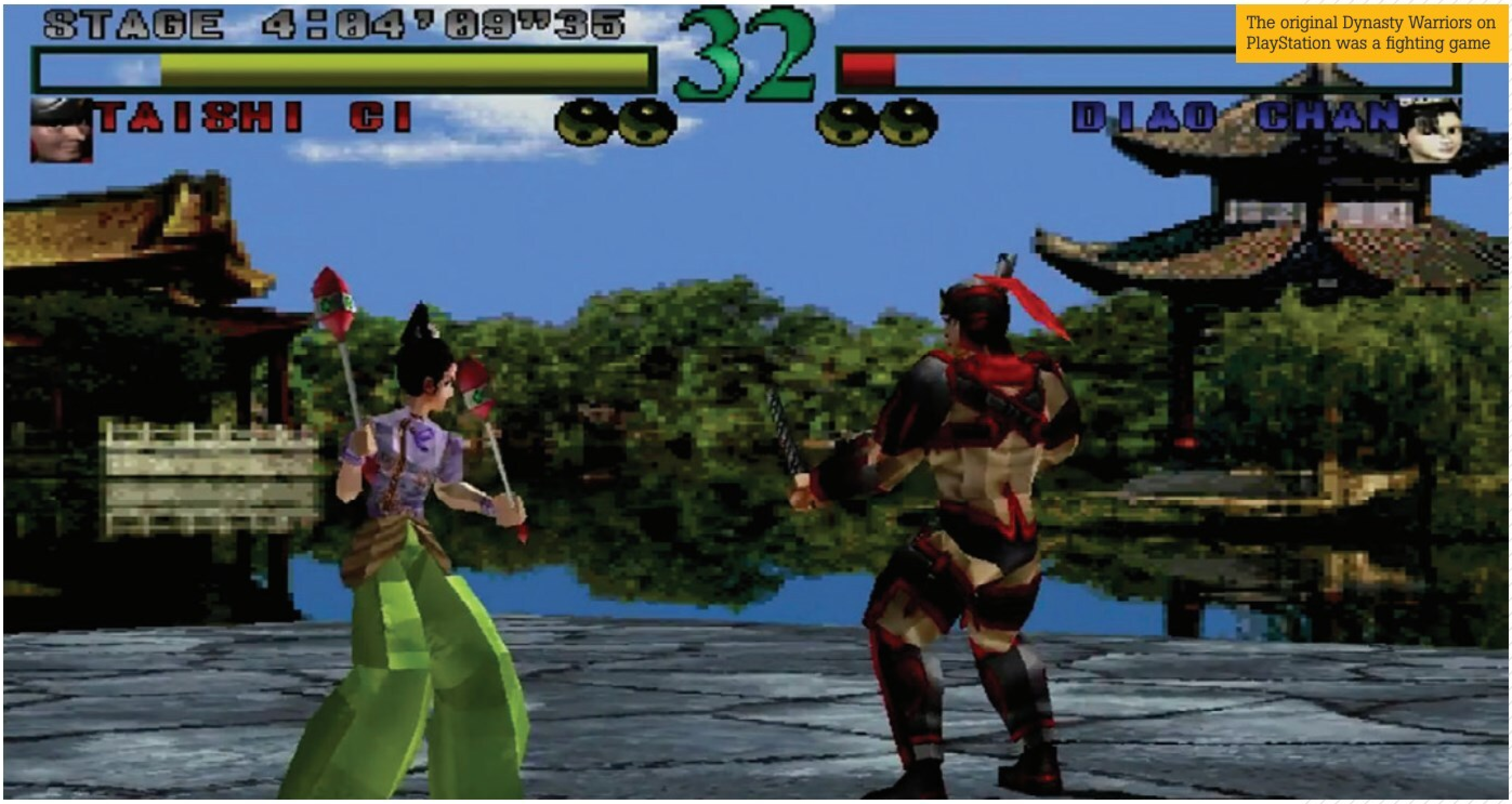
The Birth Of A Franchise

Dynasty Warriors 2 changed the franchise completely. It was the first time players took on the role of ultra-powerful warlords in the middle of battlefields, defeating gigantic armies single-handedly all on a mission to unify China under a single ruler. Many of today's familiar Dynasty Warriors mechanics were established in this entry, like how combat flows on the large battlefield and how special attacks can be charged up and unleashed for massive combos. In Japan, the game was presented as another separate Romance of the Three Kingdoms spin-off, but in North America, it was just called Dynasty Warriors 2.

Suzuki cites the Romance series as the games that inspired him to pursue a career in the game industry. "Initially, Koei's flagship products were strategy games such as Nobunaga's Ambition and the Romance of the Three Kingdoms series, but Koei's president, Yoichi Erikawa, indicated that he wanted to take on the challenge of a new genre: action games. So, the Dynasty Warriors team was formed," Suzuki says.

Dynasty Warriors 2 served as a launch title for the PlayStation 2 and was generally well-received. *Game Informer* gave the game an 8 out of 10, calling it an impressive technical showcase for Sony's new console. It presented a style of game that simply would not have been possible with previous technology, which Suzuki corroborates. "The Dynasty Warriors 2 project initially began as a fighting game for the launch of the PS2," Suzuki says. "But the team changed direction because of their strong desire to do something that took advantage the new hardware specs."

In the years that followed, new entries debuted at a frequent pace across three console generations. Omega Force added co-op, the A.I. became more reactive, and Dynasty Warriors 7 brought the series online.



The original Dynasty Warriors on PlayStation was a fighting game

Dynasty Warriors 9, which is planned for release in 2018, will be the first in the series to be released exclusively on current-gen hardware.

The Dynasty Warriors franchise is often chided for repetition, both in its moment-to-moment gameplay and its game-to-game mechanics, but Suzuki insists the team is committed to keeping the series fresh. "Since it's a series, we retain the key unchangeable elements such as the concept and world, but make changes, big and small, to various parts of each game," Suzuki says. "We also take into account player feedback, and it sometimes changes what goes into subsequent games."

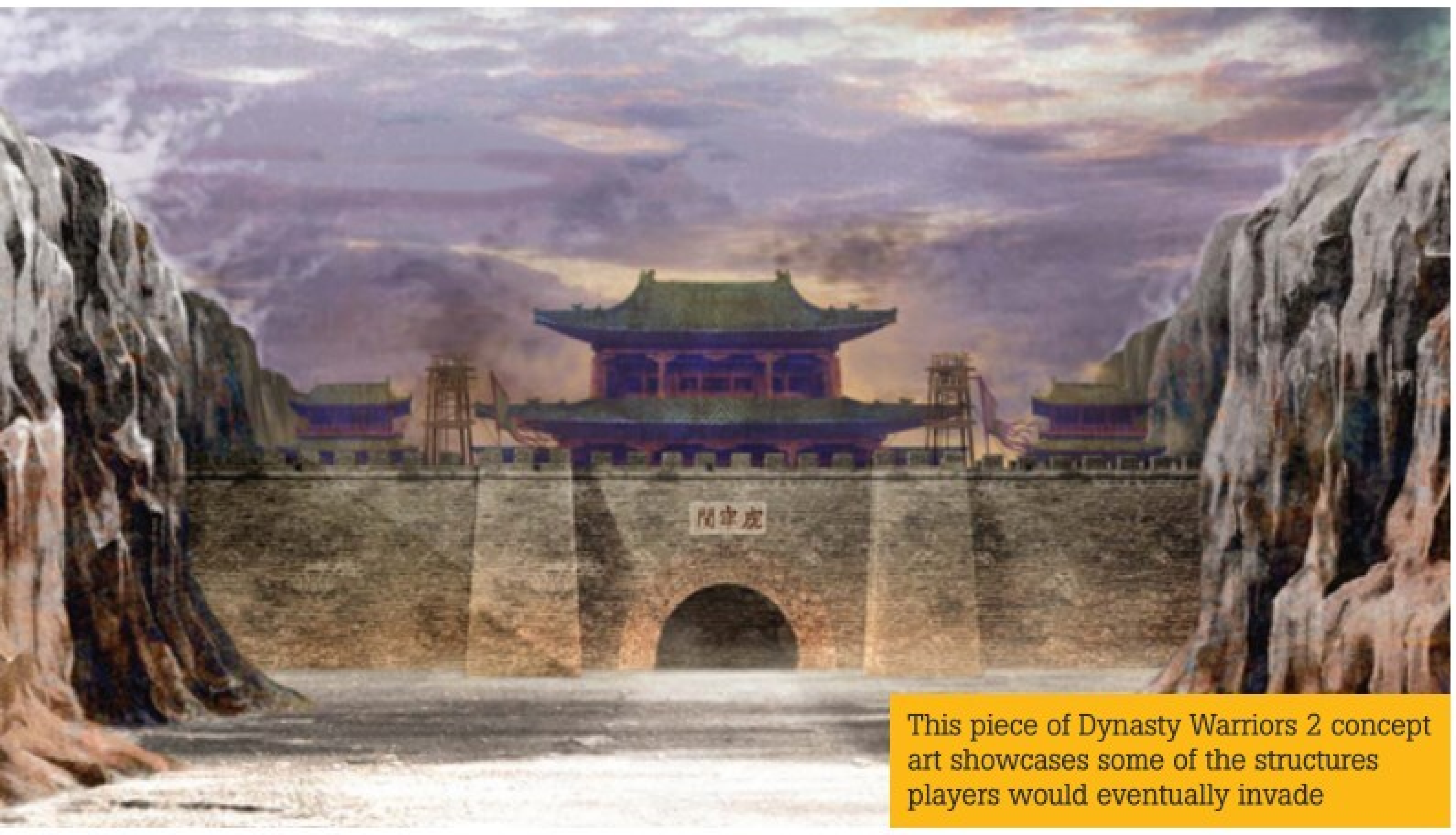
Splinter Success

In 2004, the Dynasty Warriors franchise began tackling other facets of history and gameplay. The Samurai Warriors series explores exaggerated Japanese history and in 2007, the Warriors Orochi series debuted, mashing up characters and mechanics from Samurai and Dynasty Warriors. That year also saw Dynasty Warriors cover a world of fiction with the release of Dynasty Warriors: Gundam.

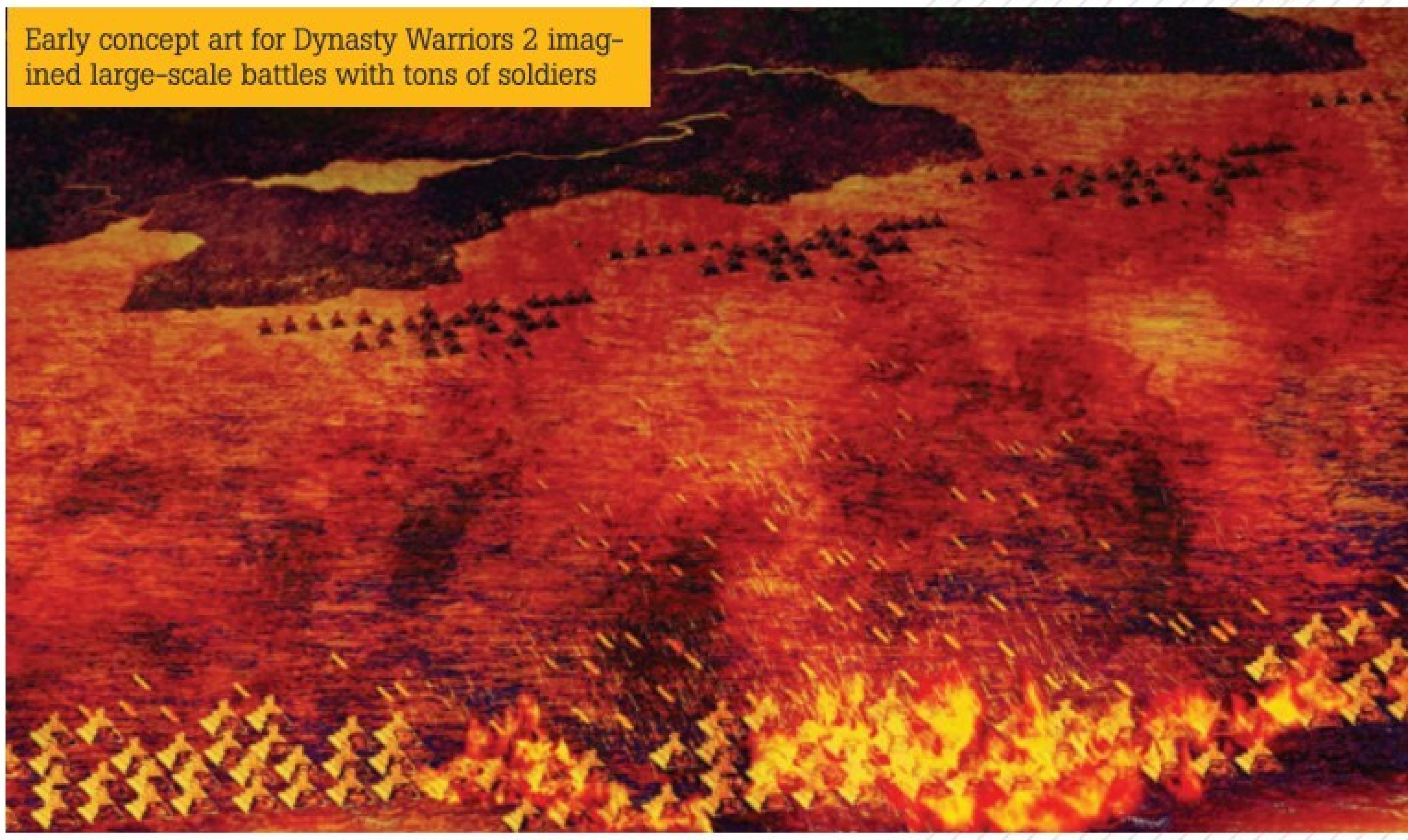
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam set a sales record for the PlayStation 3 by reaching 100,000 copies sold on its first day. The game is structured similarly to other entries, but included popular characters and storylines from the beloved anime and manga. Following its success, Omega Force created games based on anime including *Fist of the North Star* and *One Piece*. Later, the studio expanded to other game franchises like Dragon Quest, The Legend of Zelda, and Fire Emblem. It also explored a third historical era with Warriors: Legends of Troy, which took cues from Greek history for its setting.

The franchise expanded into the mobile market this year with Dynasty Warriors: Unleashed, but Suzuki says the studio is also looking beyond games. "There is a movie in the works based on the game produced by China 3D, and in Japan we are planning merchandise and stage productions, so we have various activities in the works," he says.

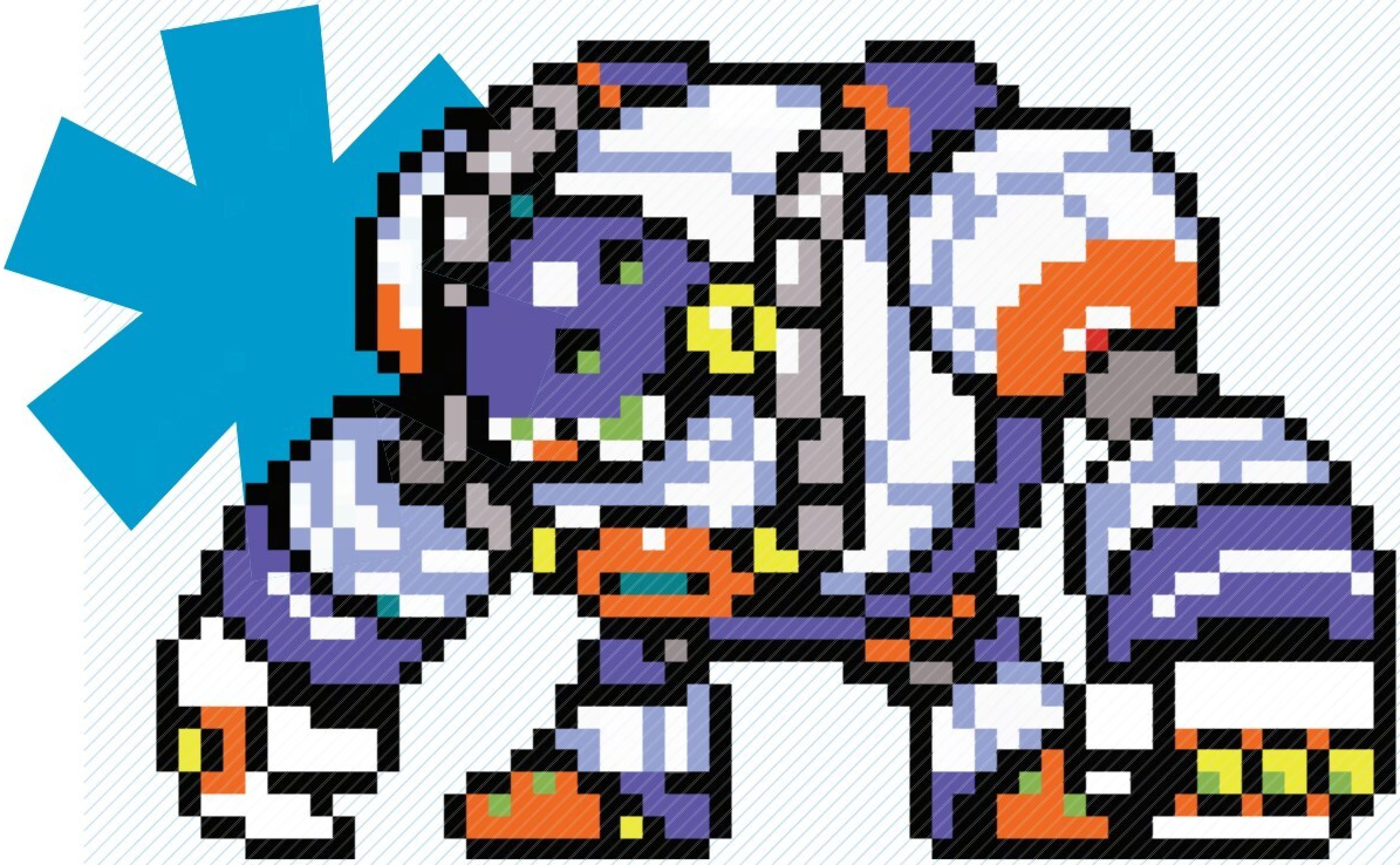
The Dynasty Warriors series has garnered a large audience and it is only growing as it is adapted to familiar franchises. "I think the appeal of the source material, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, and the game concept being easy to understand, control, and being able to experience the exhilaration of 'one vs. many' battles is what makes it popular with a wide fanbase," Suzuki says regarding the game's reach. Conquering a battlefield as a single soldier is simply fun, and Omega Force has cornered the market. ◆



This piece of Dynasty Warriors 2 concept art showcases some of the structures players would eventually invade



Early concept art for Dynasty Warriors 2 imagined large-scale battles with tons of soldiers



Mega Man Boss Or Comic Book Character?

After 30 years, Mega Man has assembled as massive roster of villainous robot masters. Mega Man's rogue's gallery is almost as absurd as those from comic books. Can you tell which name in each of these pairings is from Mega Man? ***by Ben Reeves***

1. **Metal Man**
   Or
   Anti-Matter Man
2. **Nitro Man**
   Or
   Plastic Man
3. **3-D Man**
   Or
   Gravity Man
4. **Molecule Man**
   Or
   Gemini Man
5. **Junk Man**
   Or
   Garbage Man
6. **Sheep Man**
   Or
   Animal Man
7. **Heat Man**
   Or
   Demolition Man
8. **Floronic Man**
   Or
   Splash Woman
9. **Time Man**
   Or
   Cryonic Man
10. **Molten Man**
    Or
    Magma Man
11. **Shaggy Man**
    Or
    Magnet Man
12. **Toad Man**
    Or
    Hydro Man
13. **Centaur Man**
    Or
    Machine Man
14. **Bright Man**
    Or
    Shadow Man
15. **Power Man**
    Or
    Napalm Man
16. **Clown Man**
    Or
    Animal-Vegetable-Mineral Man

Answers: 1. Metal Man (MM 2), 2. Nitro Man (MM 10), 3. Gravity Man (MM 5), 4. Gemini Man (MM 3), 5. Junk Man (MM 7), 6. Sheep Man (MM 10), 7. Heat Man (MM 2), 8. Splash Woman (MM 9), 9. Time Man (MM Powered Up), 10. Magma Man (MM 9), 11. Magnet Man (MM 4), 12. Toad Man (MM 4), 13. Centaur Man (MM 6), 14. Bright Man (MM 4), 15. Napalm Man (MM 5), 16. Clown Man (MM 8)

Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN 1067-6392) is published monthly at a subscription price of $19.98 for 1 year or $24.98 for 2 years by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 486-6100 or FAX (612) 486-6101. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/yr additional postage; all other international orders add $35/yr. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). For subscriptions, back issues, or customer service inquiries call toll free at (866) 844-4263 or mail publisher at above address. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN, and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS/POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS.

REIGN SUPREME WITH THE NEW ELITE PRO

Introducing Elite Pro, the latest, greatest GameStop PowerUp Rewards membership level. Experience greater savings, increased rewards and exclusive offers when you become the most powerful rewards member ever conceived by humankind. Elite Pro is bigger, better and boss-er than anything and everything that's come before.

REAP YOUR REWARDS

	PLAYER FREE	**PRO** $14.99/YR	NEW **ELITE PRO** $29.99/YR
POINTS FOR EVERY DOLLAR SPENT*	**10**	**20**	**30**
BIRTHDAY OFFER	✓	✓	✓
EXCLUSIVE MONTHLY OFFERS	✓	**$50**	**$50**
BUY 2 GET 1 FREE PRE-OWNED GAMES WELCOME OFFER		✓	✓
% OFF PRE-OWNED GAMES & ACCESSORIES		**10%**	**20%**
% EXTRA TRADE CREDIT ON GAMES, ACCESSORIES & TECH		**10%**	**20%**
12 ISSUES OF *GAME INFORMER* MAGAZINE		✓	✓
EXCLUSIVE PRO DAY SALES WITH OVER $4,000 IN ANNUAL SAVINGS		✓	✓
COLLECTIBLES WELCOME OFFER			✓
FREE 2-DAY SHIPPING (WITH MINIMUM PURCHASE OF $35)			✓

* Excluding purchases of GameStop gift cards.
** HK, AK, PR eligible for Free Expedited Shipping.
Excludes Guam.

GameStop POWERUP REWARDS™

Subject to terms and conditions.
Visit **PowerUpRewards.com** for details.
© 2017 GameStop, Inc.

US $5.99 | EUR €5.99 | UK £3.99

01

7 20150 37152 1

Issue 297 • January 2018

www.gameinformer.com